

PANTHER BOOKS



2/6

JAMES HADLEY CHASE

THE KING OF CRIME

The **Sucker PUNCH**



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The Sucker Punch
James Hadley Chase
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introduction

Through the open window of the beach hut, Chad could see the gentle rolling surf and the wide stretch of sand, golden and hot in the sunshine.

He could see the distant hills away to his right, and the white curving road along which Larry would come.

It was hot in the beach hut. The electric fan whirred busily, sending a current of air across Chad's glistening face.

He had taken off his coat and had rolled up his sleeves. His thick muscular arms rested on the table and a cigarette burned unheeded between his strong fingers.

He was big and powerful. Long hours in the summer sun had burned his complexion to the colour of old mahogany. His compact, heavy featured face with its pencil lined black moustache, its jutting, deeply dimpled chin, its strong, hard mouth and the steady sea-green eyes made him more than ordinarily handsome.

He reached for the bottle of Scotch he had set by the tape recorder and poured a stiff shot into the glass.

He drank some of the whisky, rolling it around in his mouth before swallowing it, then he glanced at his wristwatch. The time was twenty minutes to three. He had a clear two and a half hours before Larry came. If he started dictating right away and kept at it, he could get his story on the tape in two hours and have half an hour in hand. Time enough.

He drank a little more of the whisky, then pushed back his chair and stood up, running his fingers through his thick black hair.

Reluctantly he forced himself to look at the divan bed that stood against the far wall.

A brief patch of sunlight fell directly on the dead woman who lay on her back on the bed. Her head and shoulders hung over the foot of the bed, out of his view. He was thankful for that. The swollen, blue-black face with its staring eyes and horribly enlarged tongue curling out of the gaping mouth was something he never wanted to see again.

He forced his eyes from her as he walked over to where he had left the heavy wrench he had taken from the toolbox of the car.

He picked up the wrench and carried it to the table, setting it down within reach of his hand. He sat down again and lit another cigarette.

For some moments he stared at the tape recorder while he made an effort to think what he was going to say. But his mind kept jumping across the room to the woman on the bed, seeing again the look of terror that had come into her eyes as his fingers sank into the soft

flesh of her neck.

"Well, come on," he said aloud, his voice harsh and angry. "Get her out of your mind. She's dead. You've got to think of yourself now. You're in a goddam jam, and you've got to get out of it. Come on; get to work."

He reached out and, turned the starting switch of the tape recorder.

The two spools began to revolve, and he leaned forward towards the microphone.

He began to talk quickly, the words spilling out of his mouth while the narrow tape moved unhurriedly from one spool to the other.

"For the personal attention of District Attorney John Harrington," he said into the microphone. "Mr. District Attorney, this is a confession of murder made by me, Chad Winters, of Cliffside, Little Eden, California. The date is 30th September; the time is 2.45 p.m."

He paused to stare out at the golden sands and the blue Pacific as it rolled slowly and gently over the distant rocks. Then hitching his chair closer to the table, he went on, "It would be simple enough to tell you about the killing, how I did it and why Lieutenant Leggit didn't arrest me the moment he knew it was murder, but there is a lot more to it than that. I want you to have a clear and coherent story so you will not only know how this thing began, but why it began, and why it had to end in murder.

"Have a little patience, Mr. District Attorney, and stay with me until you get the facts you are really interested, in. I promise you you won't be bored; just relax and listen..."

chapter one

Way back in May of last year, I was sitting at my desk in the main office of the Pacific Banking Corporation, minding my own business and making out I was also minding the bank's business. At that time I was assistant stock and security clerk, and I will put it on record here and now that I was never cut out for a bank clerk. Sitting at a desk all day, looking after other people's money was my idea of hell.

On this particular May morning I had five letters in my billfold that had arrived by the morning's delivery. Four of them were from tradesmen I owed money to, threatening to write to the bank a brut my debts, and the fifth was from a girl, telling me she was pregnant, and what was I going to do about it?

I wasn't worried about the girl. I can always handle women, but the tradesmen were a problem. I had given them the old spiel so often I knew it wouldn't work again. I had to dig up some money from somewhere or I was going to get tossed out of the bank and then the wolves would really move in.

I wanted money badly, and it looked as if I would have to go to the Shylocks for it. I knew once I got into their clutches I was a dead duck, but the problem was urgent and my need was pressing. I was about to reach for the telephone book to hunt up Lowenstein's address when the intercom on my desk buzzed into life.

"Winters," I said, making my voice sound alert and efficient. Even if I didn't do much work around the bank, I took care not to advertise the fact. "Oh, Mr. Winters, would you come to Mr. Sternwood's office, please?"

That invitation meant trouble. Sternwood only saw members of the staff when he wanted to hand them a kick in the pants.

Okay, I admit it. I was in a cold sweat and my heart thumped unevenly. Had one of the sons of bitches I owed money to gone to Sternwood? Had that little tart, Paula, gone to him? Had I slipped up somewhere in my work?

As I walked past the long row of desks towards Sternwood's office, the guys peeped at me. They knew where I was going.

They were a smug, respectable lot. Most of them were married with a string of kids, and those who weren't were the kind who waited until Miss Right came along.

With the possible exception of Tom Leadbeater, none of the others approved of me. They didn't like the cut of my clothes, the way I fooled around with the prettier junior typists nor the amount of work I did.

Their disapproval stuck out like porcupine quills, and they were never friendly. Not that that was any skin off my nose. I had all the friends I wanted, and they weren't stiff-necked, tight-fisted jerks either.

I rapped on the door of Sternwood's office, turned the doorknob and walked in.

Old Sternwood and my father had been lifelong friends. It had been Sternwood's idea that I should become a banker. I hadn't been consulted. My father had jumped at the suggestion, and I have been stuck with it ever since.

I hadn't been in Sternwood's office since the day I had reported back to work after five years in the Army. He had been pretty chummy then. He had given me the returning hero and 'you'll get every chance to make a big success' kind of talk.

He didn't look as if he were going to wrap his arms around me this time.

"Come on in, Chad," he said, laying down a fistful of papers, "and sit down."

I sat down, careful not to slouch.

He pushed a gold cigarette box across the desk. We lit up in an impressive silence, then he said, "How old are you, Chad?"

"Thirty-two, sir."

"You've been with us four years since the war?"

"Yes, sir."

"And three years before the war?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Leadbeater has been with us for five years. How is it he is assistant manager while you're still at a desk?"

"I guess he's got more on the ball than I have, sir," I said, because I was pretty sure that was the kind of answer he was wanting.

He shook his head.

"The reason is because he takes a keen interest in his work, and he puts his back into it whereas you do as little as you possibly can."

"That's not quite fair, sir..." I began, but cut it short when I saw the look in his eyes. He could be a tough guy when he felt that way, and he seemed to be feeling that way right now.

"I don't want excuses, Chad. I've seen your monthly reports, and I've been keeping a pretty close check on your work for the past few weeks. You're not working, and you're not interested in your department."

My mouth suddenly turned dry. This was leading up to the gate, and I wasn't kidding myself I could get another bank job again.

"If any other member of my staff acted as you've been acting I should have got rid of him months ago. What's wrong, Chad? Don't

you want to stay with us?"

I didn't expect the sudden kindly tone, but I got the answer out quick enough.

"Yes, sir, of course I do. I guess I have been slack, and I'm sorry. If you'll overlook it this time, I'll see it doesn't happen again."

Sternwood got up and began to pace around the room.

"Your father and I were good friends. For his sake I'm going to give you another chance. You're going to have a complete change of work."

I began to breathe again.

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry to thank me," Sternwood said, coming back to his desk and sitting down. "This is a special job, Chad, and unless you keep at it, it will rise up and smother you. It's not a job for idlers. Fall down on it, and you're out. I mean that. This is your last chance. To give you some encouragement I'm raising you a hundred and fifty dollars from today. But make no mistake about it: you'll earn every cent."

I was stiff in my chair by now. There could be only one job that would match up to that description, and that was the last job I wanted: the bank's pain-in-the-neck; Leadbeater's nightmare; the job that had made him bald in six months.

Sternwood suddenly smiled.

"I see you have guessed it, Chad. From this afternoon you are in sole charge of the Shelley account."

You probably know all about Josh Shelley, and how he made his millions out of a four-in-one farm tractor, and then doubled his take by switching his factories to making tanks.

What you probably don't know is that when he died in 1946 he left everything he owned, as well as seventy million bucks, to his only daughter, Vestal.

The management of the estate and all its vast ramifications were entrusted to the Pacific with a proviso in the will that if ever Vestal became dissatisfied with the way the bank handled her affairs, she could take her business elsewhere.

There were plenty of banks and estate management firms that would have given their right eyes to have such an account, and the Pacific soon found that they were going to earn whatever profit they could chisel out of Miss Shelley the hard way.

Make no mistake about it. Vestal Shelley was a bitch of the first water. For years she had lived under old Josh Shelley's domination, and I don't have to remind you what kind of guy he had been. Up to the time of his death, she had had a pretty rotten kind of life. He kept her short of money, bullied her, didn't allow her any men friends, never threw a party for her. For the first twenty years of her life she

lived as strictly and as quietly as any nun.

If she had had a nice kind nature one would have been sorry for her, but she hadn't a nice kind nature. She took after her father. She was cruel and mean and grasping. So when the old man finally turned up his toes and dropped seventy million bucks into her lap, she came out of her solitary confinement like an infuriated bull, thirsting for blood.

Over a period of six years no less than fifteen of the Pacific's best-trained clerks had tried to handle the Shelley account. If they didn't throw in their hands from sheer despair, Vestal had them removed for incompetency.

Leadbeater had survived longer than any of the others. He had been Vestal's slave for eight months, and if you had seen him when he took the job over and had seen him when he passed it to me you would realize just how unbelievably tough the consignment was.

Everyone in the bank knew about the Shelley account. They made jokes about it, but believe me, the guy who was stuck with it didn't join in the merry laughter.

I went along and broke the news to Leadbeater.

He got up, and believe it or not, he was actually trembling.

"Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. I'm taking over from you right now, worse luck."

"We'd better go to the Shelley room then, and I'll try and put you wise."

The Shelley room was equipped from ceiling to floor with hundreds of filing cabinets. Every document, every receipt, every lease, in fact every scrap of paper to do with the estate was in this room.

Fifteen suckers had slaved here at one time or the other to produce a foolproof system, so when Miss Shelley suddenly took it into her head to call up and ask questions about this rent or that dividend, the guy who happened to be nailed to the job at that particular moment could give her the information with the minimum delay.

When Leadbeater started on file 'A' with every appearance of working his way through the works until he reached file 'Z' I stopped him.

"Hey, wait a minute," I said, sitting on the desk. "I don't want to know about all this junk. So let's skip it."

He stared at me as if I had confessed to murdering my mother.

"But you've got to know it," he said, his voice shrill. "These files are the foundation of the account. You don't know what you're saying."

I was puzzled why he had turned his back on me while he was talking.

"You've got to know where to put your hands on things," he went on, and there was a sudden shake in his voice that startled me. "You

don't seem to realize the tremendous responsibilities that go with this account. Miss Shelley expects a very high standard of efficiency. The account is one of the largest in the country. It would never do to lose it."

I lit a cigarette.

"Between you and me it would be no skin off my nose if we did lose it," I said. "If you or Sternwood expect me to have sleepless nights over it you have another thing coming."

He didn't say anything. He stood very still, his back turned to me, his head bent, his hands clinging to the drawer of the cabinet.

I saw he was trembling.

"What's up, Tom?" I said sharply. "Don't you feel well?"

Then he did something I'll never forget as long as I live; something that sent a cold chill washing up my spine.

He lowered his face on to his hands and began to sob like a hysterical woman.

"What's the trouble, Tom? Here, sit down and take it easy."

I got hold of him and led him to the desk chair and got him into it.

He just sat there in a heap, his face in his hands, his breath coming in great rasping sobs.

There was something so pathetic and defeated about him that instead of feeling contempt, I felt sorry and alarmed for him. This wasn't just spinelessness. He was a man at the end of his tether.

"Take it easy," I said, patting him on his shoulder. "Relax, you big mutt. This is no way to behave."

He took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. It was a gruesome sight to see the effort he was making to control himself.

"I—I'm sorry ... I just don't know what got into me. I guess my nerves are shot," he said and mopped his face again. "I'm sorry Winters, to have made a scene like that. I didn't mean. . . ."

"Forget it." I sat on the desk. "You look about all in. Have you been working too hard? Is that it?"

"You don't know what she is like!" he burst out suddenly. "I've tried so hard to please her! I've slaved for her! I wanted to keep this job. Sternwood promised me a raise at the end of the year. My eldest kid is going to school and the raise would have taken care of the extra expense. But Miss Shelley got to hear about the raise. She gets to hear about everything. She started picking on me. You don't know what I've been through this last month. And now it's over: without even a word from Sternwood."

"But why didn't she want you to have a raise?" I asked, wondering if overwork had sent him nuts.

"You wait," he gasped. "You're pretty confident now, but just wait.

She doesn't like anyone to be happy. She doesn't want anyone to be

successful. You may think you can handle her, but in a little while, you'll find she's gaining control. She never leaves you alone. Even at night she'll call you up to ask you something, to remind you not to forget to do something. Three times this week she has got me out of bed between two and three in the morning. Twice she has sent for me during the day, and I've had to leave a stack of work and go out there and wait for hours, and then her secretary has told me she's too busy to see me. I've had to stay late night after night to catch up with the work because she's always hanging me up. In a few months, you'll be feeling as I am feeling."

"Do you think so?" I said, shoving my chin at him. "Well, you're wrong! Let me tell you something: I know how to handle women. This bitch won't ride me. You watch it and see."

chapter two

I had a note in my diary to call on Vestal Shelley at 11 a.m. on 15th May.

During the week I had done very little work to prepare for the meeting.

I had learned to find my way about the files, but I hadn't attempted to memorize any details.

I didn't get much help from Leadbeater. He wasn't in a fit condition to do more than bring me up to date on a few outstanding points, but these points were important.

Recently Vestal had made three demands, and because Leadbeater hadn't been able to agree to them, she had brought pressure on Sternwood to get rid of him.

First, she was asking that a mink coat, costing twenty-five thousand dollars, she had recently bought, should be accepted by the tax authorities as a legitimate expense, and included in her expense claim.

As Leadbeater rightly pointed out, this suggestion was ridiculous, and the tax authorities would think the bank had gone crazy if they put forward such a claim.

Her second demand was to have all the rents of the Shelley Foundation, a two mile stretch of tenement houses on the lower East side, raised by fifteen per cent.

Leadbeater had reminded her that only the previous year she had raised the rents and could not do so again. He had the full support of Harrison & Ford, the estate management firm who handled the Shelley Foundation. They were emphatic that the rents were already out of all proportion to the conditions of the tenements, and the collectors would not be able to squeeze the extra money out of the tenants.

Her third demand was for the bank to sell a large apartment house, No. 334, Western Avenue, which her father had bought way back in 1914.

This seemed, on the face of it, a reasonable request as the property had sharply increased in value. There were, however, five tenants who had lived in the house since old man Shelley had bought it. The bank thought they should be considered. Vestal had received an offer for the house from Moe Burgess. The offer was a considerable one as Moe was anxious to turn the house into a deluxe brothel.

So apart from all the trick questions she might shoot at me, I had also these three points to get around if I were going to last any length of time working for her.

On the morning of the 15th, I took a taxi from the bank to civ one-

room apartment soon after ten o'clock and changed out of my working clothes. When Leadbeater visited Cliffside, the Shelley residence, he always wore the conventional dark suit. I decided to give Vestal a complete change of scene.

I put on a yellow linen sports jacket with pouch pockets, a white sports shirt with a brown and yellow polka dot neck scarf, a pair of gabardine navy slacks and reverse calf moccasins. I looked a lot more like a successful movie actor than an unsuccessful clerk, and that's how I wanted to look.

The private road to the Shelley residence was cut out of the cliff face. It twisted and turned for three miles, climbing higher and higher until it eventually arrived at the elaborate wrought iron fifteen-foot high gates, some 900 feet above sea level.

As the taxi rounded the final bend in the drive, the first sight of the house stood me up on my ear.

I expected something pretty grand, but this wasn't a house—it was a palace.

It stood on an imposing terrace: a vast and magnificent pile of glittering white marble.

It was quite a walk up the hundred white steps to the terrace and front entrance.

Before I could hunt around for a bell or a knocker, one of the doors opened and Hargis, Vestal's butler, stood framed in the doorway.

He was a big, fat man with the cold aristocratic face of an archbishop, and his pale grey, coldly disapproving eyes ran over me like the Siberian wind.

"I'm Mr. Winters," I said. "Miss Shelley, please."

He stood aside, and I walked into a hall the size of Pennsylvania Central Station.

"If you will take a seat, sir."

He went away, his head held high, his back stiff as a ramrod.

I moved around looking at the suits of armour, the battleaxes, the pikes and the broadswords that gleamed dully from the oak-panelled walls.

There were several oil paintings of well-fed, handsome cavaliers that might or might not have come from the brush of Frans Hals.

The atmosphere of the house began to have an odd effect on me. I found I was regretting I had put on this sports getup. I was even suddenly scared of meeting Vestal Shelley.

I had a mental picture of Tom Leadbeater in his neat dark suit, clutching his briefcase in sweating hands, while he waited in this overpowering hall for a battle he knew he couldn't win.

Hargis returned after a few minutes.

"If you will follow me. . . ."

He set off down the passage and I went after him. We walked down a corridor wide enough to take a ten-ton truck and paused outside double oak doors.

Hargis knocked softly, turned the handle and pushed open the door.

"Mr. Winters from the Pacific Banking Corporation," he said, and he made it sound as if he were announcing a third-rate act in a fourth-rate vaudeville hall.

I braced myself and walked in.

The room was small, bright and full of flowers. Casement windows opened on to a wide terrace with a magnificent view of the garden and the distant ocean.

There was a big desk by the window and seated behind the desk was a girl whose dark hair was scraped back and whose blue eyes stared at me through hard, rimless glasses.

I looked no further than the scraped back hair and the glasses, and that's where I made a mistake. Knowing what I know of Eve Dolan now it seems incredible that I shouldn't have spotted that thing in her that was to play all hell with me in a few months' time. I don't care for women who wear glasses, so I didn't bother to look closely at her, and I thought the hard effect of the scraped back hair put her straight into the sour virgin class, and I am not and never will be interested in sour virgins.

"Mr. Winters?" she asked, and I could see she was staring at my getup.

"That's right."

"Oh. I'm Miss Dolan, Miss Shelley's secretary. Won't you sit down? Miss Shelley may be a little time."

I remembered what Leadbeater had told me; how he had waited hours and then was told to go away. That wasn't going to happen to me.

"When Miss Shelley wants me you will find me in the garden," I said and walked out on to the terrace.

I heard her say something, but I kept moving. I walked down the steps to the terrace and sat on the balustrade and lit a cigarette.

I was pretty keyed up, but I kept telling myself I wasn't going to be sent away without seeing this woman. I decided to give her fifteen minutes and no more before I took action. I watched the regiment of Chinese gardeners tending the lawn, the paths and the packed flowerbeds with slow and loving care. I smoked three cigarettes while the hands of my watch crawled on. At last the fifteen minutes were up. I walked back to Miss Dolan's sanctuary.

"Miss Shelley still not ready for me yet?" I asked, putting my hands on the desk and leaning forward so she could catch a sniff of the lavender water I had used after shaving.

"I'm afraid not. She may be quite some time, Mr. Winters."

"I would like a sheet of notepaper and an envelope."

That came as a surprise. After a moment's hesitation she indicated a rack containing paper and envelopes.

"Thanks," I said. "Do you mind?" I leaned forward and lifted her typewriter away from her, set it before me on the other side of the desk, pulled up a chair and sat down.

She began to say something then changed her mind. She continued to write in an engagement book, but I could see I had taken her right out of her stride.

I pounded out the following note:

Dear Miss Shelley,

I have been waiting to see you for the past fifteen minutes. Miss Dolan now informs me that you may yet be delayed further.

I am a man with a conscience, and I feel it is my duty to remind you that every minute I remain relaxing in your beautiful garden, I am wasting both your time and your money—particularly your money. There is an old saying that the stock markets don't stand still while investors sleep.

There is also a little matter regarding a mink coat that appears to need our combined attention somewhat urgently.

I signed this note, put it in an envelope, crossed the room and dug my thumb into the bell push.

A minute or so passed, then the door opened and a young footman came in.

"Take this note to Miss Shelley right away," I said.

"Yes, sir."

There was a long impressive silence as I wandered over to the casement windows and stared out at the gardens. I lit a cigarette to steady my nerves. I had hold of myself, but inside, I was pretty worked up.

Minutes ticked by. I kept my eyes on my watch and wondered if my bluff was going to fail. Then I heard a knock on the door and the door opened. An apologetic cough sounded just behind me. I turned.

The young footman stood respectfully at my side.

"Miss Shelley will see you now, sir. This way if you please."

I followed him to the door, then as he went on ahead I paused to look at Miss Dolan.

She sat motionless, staring at me, her face bewildered and perhaps slightly admiring.

I gave her a long, slow wink, and then set off after the footman.

I felt as if I were walking on clouds.

I had no complete picture in my mind of what Vestal Shelley would look like. Seeing her propped up in an enormous bed with a high quilted headrest and on a raised dais gave me something of a shock.

She was a little thing; there was nothing of her so far as I could see. The first thing I noticed was her shock of mashed carrot-coloured hair that stood up in a gollywog cut, surrounding her small head in a fiery halo.

She was painfully thin. Her big glittering eyes were sunk deep into dark-circled sockets. Her small bony nose looked like the beak of a hawk. Her mouth was large and hidden under a plaster of blood-red lipstick.

I looked at her and she looked at me.

"You are Chad Winters?" she asked.

She had a surprisingly deep musical voice that was in odd contrast to her size and thinness.

"Yes, Miss Shelley. I am to take over from Leadbeater. No doubt, Mr. Sternwood ..." I stopped short because I could see she wasn't listening.

She was waiting to speak.

"You wrote this?" She held up my note.

"Yes."

She studied me for a long, uncomfortable moment.

"You are very handsome, Mr. Winters. Did you put those clothes on for my benefit?"

"Certainly. You seem to tire very quickly of the conventional clerk from the bank. You have used up fifteen of them, Miss Shelley, and there's only me left. I thought a change of scene might appeal to you."

"That was clever of you." She waved the note. "And this was clever too. I intended to keep you waiting for some time."

"I thought you might. That was why I wrote the note."

She inclined her head, studied me a little longer, then waved to the foot of the bed.

"Wouldn't you like to sit down?"

I climbed the four steps to the top of the dais and sat on the foot of the bed.

"What's this about my mink coat?" she asked, her eyes intent and searching my face.

If I hadn't done my work on the Shelley files during the past week, I had given considerable thought to the three points that had got Leadbeater into trouble. I had a solution for them all, but I wasn't sure how safe it would be to put the solutions forward.

"Before we go into that I would like your assurance that if you don't approve of my suggestions, you will forget I made them."

I saw surprise and interest jump into her eyes.

"Go on."

"Up to now, Miss Shelley, you have been dissatisfied with the way the bank has been handling your affairs. From what I hear, the bank has taken upon itself to give you advice you would rather not have. In

other words, you and the bank have been on the opposite sides of the river so to speak. I intend to cross the river and work on your side."

She studied me.

"You begin to interest me, Mr. Winters. Now tell me about the mink coat."

"You are asking for it to be included in your expense claim. From the point of view of the bank and the tax authorities that is an unreasonable and ridiculous suggestion."

She continued to stare at me, her face expressionless.

"It so happens," I went on, "that I am all for slugging the government if I think I can get away with it. But that isn't the attitude of the bank."

"Never mind the bank."

"We have to consider the bank, anyway, for the moment, because it is only through the bank that I can fix this item as a legitimate expense. The bank's figures are accepted by the tax authorities without question. Of course the bank has to have receipts to back up its figures, but from my experience, these receipts are asked for once in a blue moon."

"Keep going, Mr. Winters; I am following you so far."

"The only way to get the cost of this mink coat into your expense allowance is to disguise it as something else." I waited a second or so, then went on, "and that is called perpetrating a fraud."

There was a long, sudden silence.

A lot depended on her reaction. Her face told me nothing. Her eyes continued to dig into my mind.

"Would you repeat that, Mr. Winters?" she said softly.

For a moment I hesitated. Was I sticking my neck out? Would she reach for the telephone and call Sternwood?

"It would be defrauding the revenue, Miss Shelley. They could fine you or even send you to jail."

"Could it be found out?"

I drew in a long breath of relief. She had said all I wanted to know.

The rest was easy. If she had shied away from the suggestion of fraud I should have been sunk, but there was no hesitation in her voice. All she was thinking about was whether she would be found out or not.

"The way I would handle it, the chances of being found out would be five hundred to one, and that, I think, is a reasonable risk."

"How would you work it?"

"Way back in 1936 your father had extensive repairs made to a number of his farms. These repairs were legitimate expenses, and he claimed for the amount and got it. The tax authorities didn't ask to see the receipts. They accepted the bank's word that the work was done. I

have the receipts and I have bleached out the date and have substituted this year's date. I have now an up-to-date set of receipts the tax authorities have never seen before for extensive repairs to three farm buildings for the sum of thirty thousand dollars. That amount will more than cover the cost of your mink coat, won't it, Miss Shelley?"

"Suppose the tax authorities want to inspect the work?"

"That's the one in five hundred chance. If they do, then we're sunk, but they won't. They have other things to do. The Pacific Banking Corporation rates high with them. Its word won't be questioned. I promise you that."

She nodded and smiled. She had very small, white teeth.

"I think we might have a bottle of champagne on this, Mr. Winters. You seem to be a very clever young man." She touched the bell by her bed. "I think you and I are going to have a very long and pleasant business association together."

It was as easy as that. I could see the doors of the world I wanted were open. All I had to do was to go ahead and help myself.

Hargis brought in the champagne in a silver ice bucket and set it down on the table.

He opened the bottle with a flick of his fingers that only years of practice could have perfected. He poured the foaming wine into two glasses, and then offered one to Vestal and one to me. Then he went away.

"To a long and profitable relationship, Mr. Winters," Vestal said. She raised her glass.

We drank.

It was easily the worst champagne I have ever tasted, so bad that I had trouble not to grimace. I looked up and saw she was watching me.

"I am afraid Hargis has been naughty," she said, setting down her glass. "This is the muck I let the servants have at celebrations."

I went suddenly hot with anger.

"Maybe he thought it was good enough for me," I said before I could stop myself.

"Could be, Mr. Winters," she said smiling. "These old family retainers can be difficult at times. But never mind. He will come to appreciate you as he gets to know you better. Now we have the mink coat business settled, what do you propose to do about the Foundation rents?"

Don't imagine I was walking into this with my eyes closed.

She was only being gracious and condescending with her 'you're a very handsome and clever young man' talk and her lousy champagne for no other reason than the fact I was doing what Leadbeater had refused to do. She would continue to be condescending just so long as

I was useful to her. She wasn't content to get the mink coat written off on her expense account; she was greedy for more. Having got the coat, she now wanted the extra rents, and having got the rents, she would bring up the sale of 334 Western Avenue.

"The Foundation rents?" I said as if surprised. "Well, I can fix that easily enough if you want it fixed."

"How?"

"By changing your estate management firm. I know a firm who would get your increased rents for you without fuss or trouble."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"A letter from you to Harrison & Ford telling them they cease to represent you from the first of the month."

"They have collected rents for my family for over forty years."

"When a servant ceases to be useful, it is always wise to get rid of him."

She looked at me, and there was a sudden spiteful expression in her eyes.

"Be careful those words don't come home to roost."

"They are not likely to," I snapped. "I don't consider I'm your servant. Your butler may think now he can push servant's champagne off on to me, but that's a trick that can have repercussions. I can be useful to you, Miss Shelley, but don't regard me as your servant!"

"Don't get annoyed," she said, startled. "You mustn't mind Hargis. After all he is old enough to be your father. You and I, I am quite sure, will get along fine together."

I didn't say anything. At least I had let her know I wasn't to be pushed around. If she didn't like it she could get back Leadbeater.

There was a long pause, then I said. "On my way out I'll dictate a letter to Harrison & Ford for your signature."

She lay back, wrinkling her beaky nose I don't know if she meant to look charming. but to me she succeeded only in looking like a made-up, wizened little doll.

"This has been quite a morning Mr. Winters. I don't remember ever having so much such fun with a bank clerk before."

Then to round it off I got to 334 Western Avenue. She looked hard at me.

"You seem to be taking care of everything today. Have you a solution for that too?"

"No solution is needed. It's entirely up to you. Burgess wants to turn the house into a brothel. It depends on you if you want one of your father's properties to become a brothel."

I could see by her sudden frown she didn't like it as bluntly as that.

"Well, there's also the problem of the tenants," I said.

"Mr. Leadbeater tells me I shouldn't turn them out. He was quite

upset to think of them being without a home."

"There won't be any trouble about that. I'll fix it."

She raised her eyebrows "How would you do that?"

"That's something you needn't worry about, Miss Shelley. I will fix it in my way, and it'll stay fixed."

"All right. Then I would like to sell the property."

"I'll see Burgess this morning."

"This is all very satisfactory, Mr. Winters. I had no idea you were going to turn out to be such a ball of fire."

"There have been too many changes. It was obvious to me that something was wrong. The bank was forgetting the customer is always right."

She glanced at the bedside clock.

"Is that the time? I have an appointment in an hour and I'm not even dressed."

This was a pretty crude brush off. She had got all she wanted out of me, and now she wanted to be rid of me.

I stood up.

"It's been nice meeting you, Mr. Winters," she said and extended her claw-like hand. It felt cold and brittle in mine. "I think you are very clever, and I am very pleased with the change. I shall tell Mr. Sternwood."

I grinned at her. "Well, now, Miss Shelley, there are two small things you might do for me."

"Oh?" Her voice was suddenly cold. "What could I possibly do for you, Mr. Winters?"

"I want to get these matters settled for you quickly. I have no transport. It would be helpful if you could loan me a car for a day or two."

"But surely that's the bank's business to provide you with a car?"

"The bank isn't going to be told about the changes until they have been made," I said, "but if you haven't a spare car. . ."

"A spare car?" she snapped, "I have six spare cars!"

"Then perhaps you could lend me one."

She bit her lip angrily. I could see she hated parting with a car. She would hate to part with anything.

"Well, I suppose I could. Just for a day or so. All right; go to the garage. Joe will let you have one."

"Perhaps you would be kind enough to telephone him. I wouldn't want a car as bad as the champagne."

She started to look furious, then suddenly she laughed.

"You have a hell of a nerve, but I think I'm beginning to like you. You certainly know what you want and where you are going."

"I guess I do. The other point is a minor matter. I anticipate having

quite a lot of confidential work to do for you in the future. The tax matter is an example. At the moment I am working in the main office of the bank where anyone can look over my shoulder and see what I am doing. In your interests, it would be better if I had an office of my own."

She lost her patronizing air. She was beginning to look at me as if I were a human being and not a performing animal, then she suddenly giggled.

"Does that poor old fool Sternwood know what kind of a clerk he's got? I bet he doesn't. I think you are going to go far, Mr. Winters. By all means quote me. Say I insist on you having a private office."

And that's how I got my hands on a car and an office. See what I mean when I said the doors to the world I was after were wide open?

And this was only the beginning.

chapter three

Moe Burgess sat behind a battered desk, a dead cigar between his decaying teeth, a black slouch hat on the back of his head.

He was a little guy; thin, with a nose like a fishhook and a complexion like the belly of a toad.

A redhead with a bosom like a prima donna's, wrenched herself away from a typewriter and hip-swung herself across the intervening space to block me away from Moe.

"What do you want?" she demanded in a voice no more musical than a fistful of empty cans being tossed downstairs.

"I want him," I said, pointing to Moe. "Shift the scenery, sweetheart. It's good, but this isn't the time nor the place."

I stepped around her and gave Moe the teeth; then I told him who I was.

"I'm Leadbeater's successor," I said. "I'm in charge of Miss Shelley's affairs."

He eyed me over, took in the pouch pocket sports jacket, then leaned forward to examine my shoes.

"Excuse me, Mr. Winters, but somehow you don't look like a guy from the bank."

"Let's skip all that. Are you still in the market for 334 Western Avenue?"

"Sure, but that guy Leadbeater said it wasn't for sale."

"Still want it at the price?"

"Sure I do."

"Maybe I can fix it if the redhead went outside and admired the view for five minutes."

He looked a little startled, then turned his head and scowled at the girl who was typing with one finger, the tip of her tongue showing between her painted lips.

"Hey you! Get the hell out of here!"

When she had hip-swung herself through the doorway and closed the door after her, Moe said, "What's the fix?"

"You can have the house at your price if you'll take the tenants over with the sale," I told him.

"What do I want the tenants for?"

"Miss Shelley doesn't like getting rid of them. They've had the house for thirty-five years or something like that, and they're pretty old. It seemed to me you wouldn't be so sentimental about it. You could get rid of them after the house is yours."

He thought for a moment, grinned suddenly and said, "Okay, I'll

sign when she's ready to."

"Good." I paused to light a cigarette while I studied him. "Now about the fix."

His eyes went sleepy again.

"You sound like a smart boy," he said, staring at me.

"You'll get the house after paying me a fee of five hundred bucks, and not before."

He made a little grimace.

"The old shakedown, huh?"

"That's the idea. The bank doesn't approve of you. Miss Shelley is scared of you. Without me you haven't a chance of getting the house. The fix is five C's. If the house isn't worth that to you, say so."

"Okay," he said, lifting his thin shoulders. "I've always been a sucker for a shakedown." He dragged out of his inside pocket a greasy billfold, stuffed with money.

Seeing all that dough made me wish I had slugged him for a grand, but it was a little late for regrets now.

"When I get the house running, Mr. Winters, come and give the girls a try. You sound like a regular guy."

"So I am," I said, taking the bills he offered me. "I'll be around tomorrow for your signature and the property will be yours in as short a time as I can fix it."

As I went into the outer office the redhead gave me the eye and hitched her front towards me. I didn't even pause in my stride. This wasn't the time for redheads. I was hearing the soft rustle of dollar bills, and there's no sweeter music.

This was becoming quite a day.

There were five or six estate management firms in Little Eden. Harrison & Ford were the biggest and most respectable. Steinbeck & Howe were the smallest and most disreputable. This firm, I decided, would give their eyeteeth to handle Vestal's business. They were just the people to screw the extra rent out of the Shelley Foundation. Their collectors were musclemen who went around with a length of lead piping wrapped in a newspaper as an inducement to easy rent collecting.

As I drove the Cadillac along Floral Boulevard, I wondered if I dare put the bite on Bernie Howe. I had never met him, but his reputation as a shyster and a shark was notorious. A lot depended on how the interview went, and how keen he seemed to be to get his hooks into Vestal's business.

I had no difficulty in seeing him. As soon as I told the girl I was from the bank, she took me straight into his office.

How was immensely fat; tall with a round ball of a face, a drooping moustache and snapping blue eyes. He was in his middle fifties, but

looked older. He gave me a searching look as I crossed the room, stood up and offered a large moist hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Winters. Have a seat."

"You're busy and so am I," I said, sitting down. "I'll come straight to the point. I think you know the Pacific Banking Corporation looks after Miss Shelley's affairs?"

He inclined his head.

"It's my job to represent the bank in their dealings with Miss Shelley," I went on. "I have only recently taken over the job, and I am making a few changes here and there. Would you be interested in handling the rent collection of the Shelley Foundation?"

He rubbed his fat nose with a fat finger. His face was as expressionless as the back of a trolley.

"Have Harrison & Ford given up the work then?"

"Miss Shelley is considering giving them up." I took from my billfold the Shelley Foundation rent statement for the previous month and pushed it across the desk at him. "Miss Shelley wants a fifteen per cent increase on those figures."

He studied the statement for a moment or so, then glanced up.

"There will be no trouble about that. My men have been trained to collect whatever rents my clients want."

"Then you think you can handle it?"

"Certainly."

I wished he sounded more enthusiastic. We talked terms for a minute or so. Rather to my surprise his cut came slightly lower than Harrison & Ford's commission.

"You understand the Foundation is just a drop in the bucket?" I said. "Miss Shelley has property all over the country. I might be able to persuade her to let you take care of it all. Could you handle it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Winters," he returned. "Our organization is geared to handle any estate, large or small."

This lack of enthusiasm made the opening I was looking for tricky. I guessed he was deliberately playing it this way, "I said I might persuade her. It doesn't necessarily mean I will," I said, moving a little further out into the open.

Again he stroked his fat nose with his fat finger.

"If you would prefer to wait and see how we handle the Shelley Foundation, I should be happy to leave the decision to you," he returned mildly.

This fencing was getting me nowhere. I had to move right out into the open.

I grinned at him.

"Shall we get off our high horses and get this thing down on the mat? I have a valuable proposition that every estate management firm

in town would jump at. I'm bringing it to you. What's in it for me?"

His round fat face was expressionless as he gazed at me.

"What's in it for you?" he repeated. "I don't think I am following you, Mr. Winters. You did say you were a servant of the Pacific Banking Corporation, didn't you?"

"I am nobody's servant," I said, shoving my chin at him. "I happen to work for the bank, but before very long I anticipate changes. You may be interested to know that the bank is anxious to retain the services of Harrison and Ford. Let's face facts, Mr. Howe. Your firm isn't rated as the most respectable in town. The bank wouldn't give you any business, and you know it. I can swing this thing. I happen to have a lot of influence with Miss Shelley. Do you see any reason why I should give you her business for nothing?"

He studied me for a long moment.

"Yes, I can see your point of view. What do you want, Mr. Winters?"

At last I had got him out into the open.

"A thousand dollars, Mr. Howe. For that I will give you a letter right now authorizing you to take over the whole of Miss Shelley's properties."

He stared down at his snowy blotter, then looked up.

"I would prefer a letter signed by Miss Shelley herself. Give me that, and you shall have your money."

I didn't anticipate any difficulty in persuading Vestal to give him the letter.

"I'll have it here tomorrow at midday."

"Very well. Happy to do business with you, Mr. Winters. You can find your way out?"

"Have the money in cash, Mr. Howe."

"Naturally. Good day, Mr. Winters."

Out on the street I paused to wipe my sweating face. It had been easy to put the bite on Burgess, but I was now wondering if it had been a false move to have tried the same racket on Howe. He had, of course, everything to gain by playing along with me, but if he reported me to the bank, he could fix me. I didn't believe would do it. He hadn't a chance of getting Vestal's business unless he played my way.

I lit a cigarette and crossed the sidewalk to the Cadillac. I had to take risks. If it came off I would be fifteen hundred dollars to the good. I would be crazy not to take risks for that kind of money.

Back at the bank I found a message on my desk to report to Sternwood as soon as I got in. For a moment or so, my heart jumped around like a freshly landed trout.

Had either Howe or Burgess been on to him?

I could feel cold sweat beading my face as I walked into Sternwood's

office.

He glanced up and smiled.

As soon as I saw that smile I knew it was all right, and I wanted a drink as I had never wanted a drink before.

"Come in, Chad, and sit down."

I was glad to get the weight off my legs.

"Well, Miss Shelley seemed very pleased with you, my boy. She actually took the trouble to call me about you," Sternwood said, beaming from ear to ear. "That's never happened before."

"You know how it is, sir," I said casually. "We just seemed to hit it off."

"I'll say you did. She tells me you are to have a private office here," Sternwood said, chuckling. "It seems she might visit us and would want somewhere to discuss things with you."

This news startled me. I hadn't expected Vestal to put up my case for me. I wondered if after all I hadn't made a bigger hit with her than I had imagined.

"I think it is an excellent suggestion," he went on. "As a matter of fact your room's all ready for you now. I gave orders to have it prepared as soon as Miss Shelley raised the point. I want to encourage her to come here more often."

"I agree, sir."

"You are to have the office next to the Shelley room," Sternwood went on. "It has a nice view and is reasonably well furnished. I have detailed Miss Goodchild to act as your stenographer."

"Thank you, sir," I said, trying not to let him see how surprised I was by all this.

"What about these three points Miss Shelley was raising?" Sternwood went on. "How did you get on?"

On my way back to the bank I had decided how best to answer this inevitable question.

"Well, sir, I managed to talk her out of the mink coat business. It took time, but I made her see we wouldn't give way. I was pretty blunt about it. I told her it was a tax fraud, and she could be prosecuted for it. That scared her off."

"Well done! I don't mind telling you we were a little worried about tackling her that way," Sternwood said, slightly popeyed. "She has a very explosive temper. Now how about the other two points?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I'm sorry, sir, but she acted before I arrived. I'm afraid Leadbeater didn't handle her right. She felt she was being pushed around, and she's shown her independence. She's sold the house to Burgess, and she's transferred her rent collection to Steinbeck & Howe and raised the rents of the Shelley Foundation. Howe has assured her he can

collect the extra money without difficulty."

Sternwood looked as if he had suddenly swallowed a bee.

"Steinbeck & Howe! Why, they're shysters! Howe's a crook!"

"I told her that, but she told me to mind my own business. Howe could make a whale of a lot of money out of her. With your permission, sir, I propose to use what little influence I have over her and see if I can persuade her to let me deal direct with Howe. I could put a snaffle on him."

Sternwood's eyes suddenly alerted.

"Influence? What do you mean? What influence have you over her?"

I realized a little late that I had been too confident. I wasn't dealing with Moe Burgess now.

"I know it sounds a little brash, sir, but Miss Shelley did seem as if she would accept my advice."

He continued to stare at me.

"We don't want to curb Howe, Chad. We want to get rid of him. I think I'd better talk to Miss Shelley myself."

I was feeling pretty bad by now. If he telephoned Vestal about Howe and learned she didn't even know of his existence I should be in a hell of a jam.

As he reached for the telephone, I said, "Just a moment, sir. You know what she is like. Coming from you she might think she is being pushed around still more."

His hand hovered over the telephone.

"But it is my duty to warn her about Howe," he said sharply.

I had trouble in controlling my voice.

"When she told me what she had done I really went to town on Howe, sir. In the end, she got angry. She said if she heard any more about him from us, she would close the account."

He took his hand away from the telephone as if it threatened to bite him.

"If I can persuade her to let me check all the rent statements," I went on, "as they come in, I can't see that Howe can do much damage."

He rubbed his chin and nodded.

"Think you can?"

"I think so, sir."

"Perhaps I'd better."

"I'd be glad if you would let me try first. If I fail, then you can take over. It would give you a good excuse to talk to her. You could say I hadn't stated our case properly."

He seemed to like that for he relaxed back in his chair.

"All right. See her tomorrow and have a talk with her. If you're not successful, I'll talk to her." He suddenly smiled. "At least you have stopped the mink coat business. That was worrying me. You did well

there."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

I couldn't get out of his office fast enough.

chapter four

I was in my new office the next morning before nine o'clock. That was a record for me, but I had a pretty full day ahead of me, and I was raring to go.

During the night I had done some heavy thinking. I had several ideas lined up that would bring me in some personal money. I realized the power of Vestal Shelley's name. If I played my cards carefully I could cash in on her name, making a rake-off wherever I offered her business.

I realized too that I had been a mug in not pressing Burgess for more money. I might have squeezed Howe up to three thousand. I made up my mind that in the future I wasn't going to be modest in my demands. I had something to sell, and if they wanted to buy, they would have to pay for it. After I had completed a draft letter to Howe for Vestal's signature, I called Jack Kerr, a young downtown attorney I knew.

I told him I wanted him to handle the sale of 334 Western Avenue, and promised to let him have all the necessary papers during the day.

Then I spent an instructive hour going through Vestal's investment book. As I had thought, every dime was in government bonds, gilt-edged stock and stuff that was as safe as the cross-eyed virgin who once wandered into a stag party.

I did some more heavy thinking, then shoved back my chair and reached for my hat.

I drove over to West City Street and pulled up outside a big block of offices.

I took the elevator up to the fifth floor and walked down the corridor until I came to Ryan Blakestone's office.

I had known Blakestone for some years. He was young and gay and a regular guy. He had taken over his father's stock and bond business, and was now a pretty successful broker.

He was surprised to see me.

"What brings you down here?" he said. "Come on in."

When we had settled into chairs, I said, "How would you like a slice of the Shelley account, Ryan? I took over the account yesterday. I might be in a position to put some business your way."

"I'd like nothing better."

"I've been checking through Miss Shelley's stock records. Leadbeater hasn't turned over a dime of hers in months. I think I could persuade her to give you a trial, but I would have to set the stage first."

"How do you mean?"

"Know anything that's heading for a rise?"

"There are several things that might rise, but I couldn't guarantee them of course."

"Suppose you had a quarter of a million to stick into the market. Wouldn't that force a rise?"

He looked startled.

"Put that amount in the right stock and it certainly would."

"What I want is a stock that's already moving. We put in a quarter of a million and let the suckers imagine the stock is going to hit the ceiling. Got anything like that?"

"There's Conway's Cement. It has moved up five points in the past few days, but it's a risk, Chad."

"Okay, so it's a risk. The account will stand it. We can't lose more than ten grand, can we?"

He gaped at me.

"I'll be damned if you sound like a banker. Suppose we lose ten grand?"

"What are the chances?"

"Fifty to one, I'd say; but wait a minute, Chad, have you the bank's authority for a deal like this?"

"I don't need the bank's authority. I have Miss Shelley's authority. I told her I would try and find an up-and-coming broker, and would she be prepared to lose ten grand if the gamble didn't come off. She said she would."

He studied me for a long moment.

"If you want me to invest that money, Chad, I would like that statement in writing."

"You can have it in writing. Give me a sheet of notepaper."

I wrote to his dictation, but I didn't sign it.

"There's your signature, Chad."

"Yeah."

I laid down the pen. "But there's something to settle first."

"What?"

"Be your age. What do you think makes me offer you the biggest account in the state? You have the chance of handling more money than you have ever dreamed about; you have the chance of being pointed out by all the established firms as Vestal Shelley's broker, so let's ask the inevitable question: what's in it for me?"

He gaped at me.

"What is this? You can't talk that way while you're working for the bank?"

"Can't I? Okay, then I'd better go along and talk to Lowen & Franks. I can't see them turning down an offer as big as this just because I happen to work in a bank."

"Wait a minute," he said hastily. "Does the bank . . .?"

"To hell with the bank! This is between you and me. If you don't like it this way say so and I'll go elsewhere."

He lifted his shoulders.

"Okay, but I hope you know what you're doing."

"I know what I'm doing. Now, listen, you get the account if you give me half the commission."

That really shook him.

"For crying out loud! Half...!"

"Half the commission on all deals you put through for Miss Shelley. Take it or leave it. What's it to be?"

He studied me for a couple of seconds and then grinned.

"You're a goddam robber, but of course it's on. You're really convinced about Conway's Cement?"

"Of course I am."

I signed the letter and flicked it across the desk.

"Buy a quarter of a million, then duck out as soon as it rises two or three points. You might even get out today."

"What if it starts a run and really climbs? Shall I stay in?"

"No! Get out today if you can. I want to make her a fast profit. She's a greedy bitch, and if she sees I can make her a quick profit there's no knowing how much business she'll put our way."

I left him after we had talked some more and I drove over to the Western California Bank. Using a hundred dollars of Moe Burgess' money I opened an account.

Then I headed back to the bank.

At that moment I was right on top of the world. I had a car, an office of my own, a stenographer, money in the bank and the prospects of a whale of a lot more money coming my way.

On top of the world? Why I was up among the planets. I was just thinking about a nice expensive lunch, at the Florian restaurant when the telephone bell rang. I scooped up the receiver impatiently.

"Mr. Winters?" A woman's voice. "This is Miss Dolan."

"Miss Dolan. Oh yes, Miss Shelley's right hand. How are you, Miss Dolan?"

"Miss Shelley wants you to come over right away."

Miss Shelley was going to be unlucky. I was hungry, and besides, I was determined I wasn't going to jump through the hoop every time she snapped her fingers.

"I'll be around after two, Miss Dolan. I have some papers for Miss Shelley's signature."

"She said right away."

"Make my excuses please. I'm tied up until after two."

There was a pause, and she said, "I don't think you understand. It is

to do with Mr. Howe."

An invisible fist hit me like a sledgehammer.

"Howe? You mean Bernie Howe? What about him?"

"He has just left. Miss Shelley told me to get you here at once. I have never seen her in such a rage."

So the son of a bitch had betrayed me!

Suddenly I was in such a panic I couldn't even speak. Just when I was halfway through the door! I might have known the shyster wouldn't have bothered to go to Stern wood. He would go to Vestal who would cause me most grief.

"Are you there, Mr. Winters?" the quiet voice said in my ear.

"Yes." I managed to get out, but it sounded like the croak of a frog.

"Listen, Mr. Winters," the voice went on, "please pay attention to what I'm saying. There's only one way to deal with her when she is in a rage like this. Don't apologize. Don't excuse yourself. You must shout back at her. You must give her better than she gives you. Do you understand? You have nothing to lose. Anyone who has the nerve to shout louder than she can will flatten her. I know her. She's just sound and fury, and she has no courage. Are you listening to what I'm saying?"

I was listening all right. I was listening as if my life depended on it.

"You wouldn't kid me?"

"Of course not! It is your only hope. I don't say it will do any good, but it is your only hope. Whatever you do, don't make excuses. Can I tell her you are coming now?"

"Yes. Tell her I'll be over in a quarter of an hour. And Miss Dolan, I don't know why you are giving me this advice, but I appreciate it."

I became aware that she had hung up. I dropped the receiver back on its cradle, wiped my face and hands and pushed back my chair.

I wasn't kidding myself. Even if I could find the nerve to shout the roof off, Vestal still had the last word.

The car, the office, the smart Miss Goodchild, Howe's thousand dollars, Blakestone's half commission and my job were on their way out.

I left the office, walked along the corridor to the back entrance where I had left the Cadillac and drove fast to the nearest bar. I pulled up and went in and threw three double whiskies down my throat as fast as the barman could pour them.

The whisky put me back on my feet again.

I did the trip to Cliffside in a shade over seven minutes. The way I stormed up that cliff road would have given me the creeps at any other time.

By the time I reached the iron gates I was cursing Howe as I had never cursed anyone before.

Hargis opened the door and took my hat. His face was expressionless, and yet I was sure he knew why I had been sent for. I guessed he would be waiting to hand me my hat when I came out. If he grinned or showed his triumph I promised myself I'd ram his bridgework down his throat.

"Miss Shelley will see you, sir," he said, and conducted me along the wide corridor to a big lounge, opening out on to the terrace. "You will find her on the terrace, sir."

I drew in a deep breath and walked out on to the terrace.

She was sitting on the balustrade in a pair of bottle-green lounging pyjamas. From the back she looked like a child, but there was nothing childlike in the pinched, white, rage distorted face she turned to me.

"Oh, the clever Mr. Winters," she said, swinging around on the balustrade, her voice strident, her eyes glittering. "Well, Mr. Winters, what have you to say for yourself?"

I moved further on to the terrace, my hands in my pockets, my bean banging against my ribs, my face politely inquiring.

"What am I expected to say?"

"Don't pretend you don't know, and don't you dare lie to me!"

"What is all this about? Am I supposed to have displeased you or something?"

She was shivering with rage and her claw-like hands opened and closed as if resisting the temptation to scratch my eyes out.

"Do you know Bernie Howe?" she demanded in a strangled voice.

"Why, yes. He is a smart criminal lawyer. I was going to talk to you about him, Miss Shelley. I thought he might be just the man to collect the Foundation rents for you."

"Never mind that!" she screamed at me. "Did you or did you not offer him the work in return for a thousand dollars?"

"Why, certainly. That's the usual practice when dealing with a shyster like Howe. He expects to pay a commission on the jobs he gets offered. But surely that's not what has put you out of temper, is it, Miss Shelley?"

She slid off the balustrade and came up to me. Her head didn't reach my shoulder and she was at an immediate disadvantage, but she didn't seem to realize it.

"And you intend to keep that money for yourself?" she demanded.

Here was a chance for an out. I could tell her I intended to hand the money to her, and she might be greedy enough to take it and calm down.

Maybe those three whiskies had made me reckless. I was suddenly damned if I would offer her the money.

"What did you expect me to do with it?" I asked, smiling. "Give it to some charity?"

"So you demanded a bribe, and in return for this bribe, you were going to give Howe my authority to collect the Foundation rents, is that it?"

"Bribe is the wrong word, Miss Shelley. I was collecting a commission to which I am entitled."

"Are you? Why, you cheap crook!" she screamed violently. "How dare you stand there grinning at me like a goddam monkey! How dare you use my name to fill your filthy pockets!"

I took a sudden step forward and shoved my chin at her.

"Are you calling me a crook?"

"Yes, I am! You're nothing better than a shyster! You're a damned racketeer!" Her voice rose until everyone in the house must have heard her. "The moment I set eyes on you in your flash suit and with your smooth smart-alec ways I knew you were a crook!"

"You're making an exhibition of yourself! Do you have to scream at me like one of Burgess' street walkers?"

She stepped back, her thin, spiteful little face livid.

"What did you call me?" she said, her voice suddenly hushed.

"I told you to stop screaming like a floosie," I said, also lowering my voice.

"I'll make you pay for that! I'll have you thrown out of the bank! I'll have you hounded out of this town. I'll see you never get another job as long as you live!"

"Don't be so dramatic," I said contemptuously. "Do you imagine you can scare me? You're not dealing with a spineless sob sister like Leadbeater now. Do you imagine I care a damn for your ranting and raving?" I took another step forward, my face as tough as I could make it. "Do you?"

I imagined I saw surprise behind her rage.

"We'll see about that!" she screamed. "Get out of my way! I'll talk to your boss and see what he has to say."

She stormed past me into the lounge.

This was it. If I let her talk to Sternwood I was sunk. What had I to lose?

I was in a flaming rage myself by now, and I went after her, caught up with her as she was picking up the receiver and my hand came down on hers.

"Just a moment!"

She swung around and her left hand flashed up and struck me on the side of my nose; her bony little knuckles scraping the skin.

I guess I must have flipped my lid. I don't exactly remember what happened for a few seconds. I suddenly found myself shaking her by her shoulders, jerking her carrot-coloured head backwards and forwards, glaring down at her as if I could murder her.

She tried to scream, but she just didn't have any breath left in her body.

Her mouth hung open, her eyes started out of her head, and she looked scared out of her wits.

I slammed her down in a chair so violently she nearly bounced right out of it, and still keeping my hands on her shoulders, my face close to hers, I let the words pour out in a low, violent rush.

"Listen to me! For weeks you have been hammering at Leadbeater to get that goddam mink coat of yours accepted as an expense claim, to raise your rents and to sell your house. You kept after him until he became a nervous wreck, but you didn't succeed in getting your own way. I fixed your coat, your rents and your house. I fixed them in one day! Do you hear? In one day, after you had been struggling with Leadbeater for weeks! All right, so what's happened? You clean up thirty thousand dollars on the coat! You make yourself five thousand dollars a year on the increased rents! You get rid of five tenants you hadn't the guts to get rid of, and you sell a house at a profit! Because of me!" I shook her again. "Do you hear?" I leaned forward and yelled it at her: "BECAUSE OF ME! I did it! What the hell do you imagine I did it for? Because I want to curry favour with you? Because I want to drag you into my bed? Like hell! I am in this racket for the same reason as you are! I want to make money out of it as you want to make money out of it! And what do I do? Cheat you? Take your money? Do I?" I shook her again. "Like hell I do! I make money for you and I get my cut from the suckers who pay you. So what are you yelling about? Have I stolen anything from you? Have you lost a dime because of me?" I let go of her and stepped back. I was shaking and there was sweat on my face. "Go ahead and call Sternwood. Tell him! Whine to him! Okay, I'll lose my job, but what will you lose? Do you imagine you will be able to swing that tax fraud without me? Go ahead and see for yourself. See how fast you'll land in jail! You'll talk yourself out of thirty thousand dollars! But go ahead and talk yourself out of it! Do you imagine I care?"

I turned my back on her and walked out on to the terrace. I felt as if I had been in a fight, and I didn't give a damn now one way or the other.

I sat in a basket chair and stared at the view for perhaps five minutes, then I became aware she was standing beside me.

There was something rather pathetic about her tiny, thin ugliness.

"You hurt me," she said plaintively. "You've bruised me."

"What do you imagine you've done to me?" I said, dabbing the side of my nose with my handkerchief. Where she had broken the skin, blood oozed slowly. "You're lucky I didn't wring your neck."

She sat down beside me.

"I think I would like a drink. Are you too occupied with your own selfish feelings to get me one?"

I went into the lounge and rang the bell.

Nothing I can say can give you an adequate idea of my feelings. I had fought and licked her! I knew it, and she knew it too. It meant I was through the door now and nothing could stop me! It was the greatest triumph of my life.

Hargis came in. I could tell by his expression that he was expecting to be told to throw me out. When he saw me with my thumb jammed in the bell, he came to an abrupt standstill.

"Bring a bottle of your best champagne," I said.

He looked from me out on to the terrace where Vestal had opened her pyjama jacket to examine her bruises. She was humming a little tune under her breath.

"Yes, sir," he said, his face expressionless.

"And make sure it is your best champagne this time," I went on. "I'll break the goddam bottle over your head if it isn't!"

His eyes dwelt on my face. There was a lot of hate in them.

When he had gone I went over to the telephone and called Blakestone's number.

"Any news yet on Conway, Ryan?"

"Sure. I've just got out. There's a profit of thirty-five thousand dollars for Miss Shelley, and I'm crediting you with nine hundred dollars commission. Okay?"

I glanced out on to the terrace.

Vestal was still examining her bruises. She had half-twisted around in her chair, and from where I stood I could see her white emaciated chest and her flat, unformed bosom. I shifted my eyes. There was no beauty there; just something dried up and unlovely.

"Fine," I said. "Make Miss Shelley's cheque out to me."

"But look, Chad..."

"You heard what I said!" I snapped. "You work for me, not for her. I'll give her my cheque. Understand?"

"Well, okay, Chad, but it isn't usual."

I dropped the receiver back on its cradle. No one was going to punch me on the nose and not pay for it. Instead of getting thirty-five grand, Miss Shelley would collect only twenty. The other fifteen thousand was going to be salted away in my bank as compensation.

Now do you see what I mean?

I was through the door and into a new and wonderful world.

As I walked out on the terrace, Vestal hurriedly closed her pyjama jacket. Then she did something I would never have expected her to do; something that shocked me, and believe me, I am not easily shocked.

She gave me a coy little glance and a coy little smile.

"You shouldn't have sneaked back like that," she said. "I believe you were peeping."

Peeping! If such a suggestion hadn't been disgusting to me, it would have been gruesomely funny. Did this wizened, flat-chested, ugly little creature really imagine I should want to peep at her? Did she imagine I was that hard up for women? Couldn't she see by just looking at me I had only to snap my fingers and there would be a flock of women rushing at me?

Somehow I managed to dig up a flashing smile.

"You're embarrassing me, Miss Shelley. I had something on my mind. I have just made you twenty thousand dollars."

She immediately forgot to be coy and her eyes popped open.

"I had a little flutter on your behalf," I went on, sitting down beside her. "This morning I gave my broker instructions to buy a quarter of a million dollars' worth of Conway Cement. It moved up four points, and he got out with a twenty, thousand dollar profit."

She stared at me.

"You—you used a quarter of a million of my money without asking my permission?" she gasped.

"I didn't use your money," I said impatiently. "I used your name which happens to be worth more than money. In other words I pledged your credit."

"I've never heard such a thing! Suppose the stock had gone down? You don't imagine I would have accepted responsibility, do you?"

I grinned at her.

"The stock couldn't go down. If you put a quarter of a million dollars into a concern, its stock value must go up. Isn't that obvious?"

"But you didn't consult me." She looked sharply at me. "How much did you say I've made?"

"Twenty thousand, but if you're doubtful about taking it, just say so. I can use it."

She gazed at me for a long moment. Into her eyes came a fascinated, admiring look.

"It seems, Mr. Winters, you really are a very clever young man."

"In spite of being a cheap crook and a damned racketeer?"

She laughed.

"I was angry then."

"Well, go ahead and apologize," I said, staring straight at her. "Unless, of course, you still think so."

She made a face at me.

"I don't think so now. I apologize." She rubbed her shoulders ruefully. "And you had better apologize too. You hurt me."

"Not likely. It's about time someone manhandled you. You've been having it too much your own way. You should be glad I didn't give

you a damned good hiding."

A little cough sounded behind me and I glanced around. Hargis was standing by my side, holding a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and two glasses on a tray. He set them down on the table, opened the bottle and poured the wine.

As he was about to move away, I said, "Wait a moment. Let me taste this wine." I tried it, nodded and looked up at him. "That's a lot better, Hargis. It could have been a little more chilled, but it will do. Okay, run along."

He went away, rigid and silent.

Vestal giggled.

"I can't imagine what he is thinking." She took the glass I handed to her. "You shouldn't have spoken to him like that."

"It's time someone put him in his place. Let's forget him. He's not important," I said. "Let's talk business, Miss Shelley. What have you arranged with Howe?"

"I haven't arranged anything. I was so angry I wouldn't listen to what he wanted to say. I told him I would see him later."

"Okay, then I'll handle him. Howe's a useful man. He can collect your rents without trouble, but he needs me to control him."

She looked hard at me.

"You know, Mr. Winters, I am glad you are on my side. You are on my side, aren't you?"

"I've given you enough proof of that, haven't I? I am on your side all right, and I am on my side too. It just happens your side and my side are on the same side. Now we've cleared the air, I want to talk to you about your investments. The bank hasn't attempted to turn your spare money over for months. I suggest you give me your authority to make changes. I also want your authority to free a quarter of a million in cash so I can gamble with it." As she started to speak, I went on quickly, "It is understood that if I lose more than twenty thousand in any one month, the use of the money is withdrawn. I will submit a fortnightly statement to show you exactly what I am doing with the money, and if I don't make you the minimum of five thousand dollars a month tax free, the money goes back into gilt edge stock again."

"But I don't want to lose twenty thousand," she said. "I can't agree to that."

"I have just made you twenty thousand for nothing," I said impatiently.

"In actual fact I am supplying the margin on which I'll gamble. So what are you worrying about? But if you don't want some tax-free money, say so and I won't bother."

She hesitated.

"I want a weekly statement then."

"All right. I don't care. Have a weekly statement."

"You really think you can make me five thousand a month tax free?"

"I'm damned sure I can."

"Very well, you can have the money." She studied me doubtfully. "I suppose you will be making something out of it yourself?"

I laughed.

"Of course I shall. I have an arrangement with my broker. It won't cost you a dime, but it'll cost him plenty." I pushed back my chair and stood up. "Well, I have a lot of things to do, Miss Shelley. I'll run along now."

She sat looking up at me. The fascinated, admiring expression was still in her eyes.

"Perhaps you would like to dine with me here tonight?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, but I have a date tonight."

She looked suddenly sulky.

"Oh. Some woman, of course."

"I'm going to the fights. No woman tonight."

"Fights? What fights?"

"Out at Parkside Stadium."

"I've always wanted to see a fight. You wouldn't take me with you, would you?"

I was just about to turn her down, when I suddenly realized that the exclusive, important Miss Shelley, worth seventy million dollars, was actually angling for an invitation.

I didn't want to take her. I had a nice blonde lined up for tonight, but I saw an important opportunity here; too important to pass up. It would do my credit a power of good and it would make a big impression on the sporting boys to see me with Vestal Shelley hanging on my arm.

"You really want to come?" I said, as if I didn't care one way or the other.

"Oh yes, please." She jumped to her feet, her thin, pinched little face suddenly animated and bright. "Will you take me?"

"Well, all right if you want to come. Suppose I pick you up at seven? We can have dinner at the Stadium."

"I'll be ready at seven."

"Fine. Well, so long, Miss Shelley." I moved towards the steps leading to the garden, then paused, "I still have that car of yours. Can I keep it a little longer?"

"Why, yes." She was looking at me in a way that surprised me. Her eyes were bright, her face flushed and she seemed suddenly as excited as a child going to its first party. "Keep it as long as you like, Mr. Winters."

"Thanks."

As I drove slowly down the cliff road, back to Little Eden, I took stock.

In two days I had cleaned up twenty-four thousand dollars! It seemed unbelievable, but it was a fact. My partnership with Ryan Blakestone would bring me in at least a thousand a month. What had I to worry about? At last I was getting the breaks. If I handled this setup right, and I intended to handle it right, there was no end to the money I could make.

I drove over to the Florian restaurant feeling I had a pretty good morning's work behind me.

chapter five

The last of the preliminary bouts was on when we left the Stadium restaurant and walked down the dimly lit aisle to our ringside seats.

I had quickly discovered that taking Vestal Shelley out for the evening was a regal occasion.

She was wearing a flowing white evening gown with white tulle to hide her skinny shoulders. She was ablaze with diamonds. She had a diamond collar around her throat, diamonds in her hair, diamonds covering the bodice of her dress, and diamonds around her wrists. The effect was pretty overpowering and her every movement sent brilliant flashes to dazzle me.

We went to the Stadium in a Rolls Royce as big as a battleship. Joe, the chauffeur, was decked out in a cream whipcord uniform, patent leather knee boots, gauntlets and a cream peaked cap with a black cockade in it.

I felt as if I had been caught up in some Hollywood epic, and when the Stadium manager came down the red carpeted steps to welcome her to her first visit to the Stadium, it was then I thought of the evening as a regal occasion.

Half way through dinner, the Press arrived, and spent the rest of the meal firing off flashlights at us. It seemed Miss Shelley seldom appeared in public, and her visit to the fights was causing a major sensation.

We didn't get much chance to talk to each other during dinner, what with Press photographers, columnists and the maître d'hôtel pestering us, and in a way it was a good thing. But I could see she was getting as big a bang out of the outing as I was.

It's a funny thing, but it didn't occur to me that she was getting her bang out of being in my company. I thought she was getting it, as I was, from the fuss and attention we were receiving. It was only later that I realized it was my company that had made her so animated.

It was while we were having coffee and brandy that a big, burly, hard-faced guy in a creased grey suit, his black hair close cropped and turning a little grey at the temples, came up to our table.

He bowed to Vestal, giving her a tight little grin.

"This must be a record, Miss Shelley. You at the fights!"

I expected she would give him a cold brush off, but she seemed pretty glad to have him notice her.

"Mr. Winters persuaded me," she said, looking coyly at me. "After all, we should all try everything once." She touched my sleeve. "This is Lieutenant Sam Leggit of the City police, lieutenant, this is Mr.

Winters, the banker."

That was the first time I had met Leggit and I could see right away he didn't like the look of me anymore than I liked the look of him.

"Haven't I seen you at the Pacific, Mr. Winters?" he asked, his hard grey eyes probing. Mr. Winters, the banker wasn't cutting any ice with him. He was telling me he knew I was just a clerk who could be kicked by my boss as he could be by his.

"I wouldn't know," I said indifferently. "We get a lot of traffic through the bank."

"Yeah, I guess that's right." He looked from me to Vestal and from Vestal back to me. "Glad to know you, Mr. Winters."

I didn't see why we should both tell a lie so I didn't say anything.

"I'll have a man watch those diamonds, Miss Shelley," he went on. "This joint's not all it should be. No need for you to worry." He gave her his tight little grin, nodded curtly to me and moved off into the crowd.

"So you have a cop to look after you," I said lightly.

"The Lieutenant and I are pretty good friends," she said, like a child who is claiming a general once patted her head. "I used to know him when he was on patrol. He comes to dinner sometimes and tells me about his cases."

"Must be nice for you," I said sarcastically. "Well, if you want to see the big fight, we'd better get going."

We got to our seats as the announcer was introducing the main bout of the evening. It was a fifteen round contest between Jack Slade, the middleweight champion and Darky Jones, an almost unknown challenger.

The two men were in the ring now, and Vestal was feasting her eyes on them.

I told her Slade was the favourite and asked her if she would like to make a bet.

"I'll bet on the brown man," she said. "There's something about him that fascinates me. Look at those muscles and those eyes. Of course he's going to win."

"Not a chance. Slade hasn't been knocked out in twenty fights. He's right on top of his form. Jones has a punch, but he won't get a chance to land it."

"I'll bet a hundred dollars on the brown man."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

I pushed past a couple of dozen knees to the aisle and crossed over to where Lefty Johnson was sitting.

"Evening, Mr. Winters," he said, giving me a leering smile. "I see you're stepping high tonight."

"A hundred on Jones to win, Lefty. Okay?"

"Sure. Tired of keeping your dough, Mr. Winters?"

"Not my bet. I'll have fifty on Slade."

I just got back to my seat in time for the bell.

Jones came out of his corner as if he had been fired from a gun. There was a flurry and a brown flash, and he was in Slade's corner before Slade was scarcely off his stool. The whole thing happened so fast, only the ringside customers really saw what happened. The brown man's right fist smashed against Slade's jaw with the impact of a shell. They were right above us, and I saw Slade's eyes go empty and his knees sag.

Jones brought up a left upper cut. He was a shade too fast, and his fist missed Slade's jaw and smashed against his cheekbone, drawing blood. Slade went down on hands and knees. He stared straight at us, his jaw hanging, his eyes vacant, his senses paralysed.

I became aware that Vestal was leaning forward, her fingers gripping my wrist, her mouth open. There was so much noise going on I couldn't hear her scream, but I knew she was screaming. Half the crowd were on their feet, yelling their heads off. The Stadium rocked with the sound.

The referee shoved Jones back, waving him to a neutral corner. But Jones was excited, and the referee had to shout at him to get him to obey his order.

The delay had given Slade a few valuable seconds. I was watching him. I saw a spark of life come into his eyes. The referee was bending over him, yelling the count at him, his arm rising and falling.

"A sucker punch!" I shouted in Vestal's ear. "The mug! The goddam mug!"

I don't think she even knew I had spoken. She was crouched forward, her eyes gleaming, her face a ferocious, hard mask as she watched the seconds tick off.

Slade was on his feet at the count of nine. As Jones shot across the ring, Slade slid into a clinch, hanging on desperately, smothering the brown arms, while he fought to bring his senses into action again.

The referee had to tear the two men apart, and in his excitement Jones released a hail of punches instead of stepping back, measuring his man and handing out the one finisher.

Slade covered up, retreating around the ring, with Jones chasing him.

The crowd was screaming for the kill, but Jones hadn't the experience to get through with a finisher. The bell went just as Jones had succeeded in manoeuvring his tottering opponent into a corner and was setting himself to let fly another wild barrage of punches.

"Well, that's that," I said in disgust as the brown man stormed angrily back to his corner. "His jaw's broken. What a mug! To have

fallen for a sucker punch with his experience! It'll be over in the next round."

Vestal was still clutching my wrist.

"I've never been so excited," she gasped. "This is wonderful! You mean he really has a broken jaw?"

"Well, look at it. Look at the way it's hanging. Jones has only to hit him there, and it's over."

Vestal leaned forward, her eyes avid as she stared at Slade who lay back in his corner, his great chest heaving, his jaw hanging loose, his eyes vacant.

The bell went and out came Jones, his face a snarling, ferocious mask.

Slade had both hands up to protect his broken jaw, and as Jones rushed at him, Slade's left stabbed out and caught Jones in the face, sending him reeling back.

Slade shuffled forward. His right and left moved with piston like precision, driving Jones before him.

Vestal was yelling again, and she wasn't the only one.

Jones's seconds were bawling for him to finish it, but he was getting flurried. Every time he set himself to bring over a haymaker, Slade's left stabbed out and threw him off balance. Slade kept that up until the dying seconds of the round, then Jones managed to catch him with a vicious left hook to the side of his face. His expression of agony had Vestal screaming like a mad thing for Jones to go in and finish him.

Slade went down on one knee. He looked like a wounded and dangerous lion as he snarled up at the brown fighter who stepped away from him.

Blood ran down his face from a cut eye; blood ran out of his mouth.

The bell stopped the count, and Slade's seconds poured into the ring to half carry him back to his corner.

"Oh, this is something!" Vestal said, her chest heaving. "I didn't imagine a fight would be like this! Oh, Chad, I'm so glad I came with you!"

Oh, Chad!

It had slipped out, but the spectacle of two thugs bashing each other's brains out hadn't deadened me enough so I didn't hear what she had said.

The third round was the last. Jones's seconds had finally got their instructions hammered into the brown man's skull: don't rush, pick your punch and nail him.

The end came in the second minute of the round: a hard left hook, followed by a right cross. Both punches exploded on Slade's shattered jaw. He gave a blood-chilling little grunt as he went down on hands

and knees, his face ghastly with agony.

He tried to drag himself off the canvas, but the effort proved too much for him. He rolled over on his back, still conscious, but finished.

Vestal had jumped to her feet. I had to pull her back or she would have got to the apron of the ring.

"Take it easy," I shouted to her.

She struggled to get away from me, her face turned to the ring, but I held her. She wasn't the only one who was behaving like a sadistic lunatic. The noise was enough to break your eardrums.

And when the count was over and they had dragged Slade to his corner, Vestal collapsed against me. I had to hold on to her or she would have dropped to the floor.

"Get me out of here, Chad," she gasped. "I feel I'm going to faint."

Through the press around the ring, Leggit suddenly appeared.

"Do you want any help, Mr. Winters?" he said.

"I want to get her out of here fast."

"Follow me."

He went ahead, forcing his way as only a cop can force his way. I half-carried, half-walked Vestal along behind him.

He took us to the staff quarters and dressing rooms, away from the mass of people now surging to the exits.

"You wait here," he said. "I'll get your car."

I stood in the dimly lit passage, feeling the hot, stifling air from the arena on my face as I held on to Vestal.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm all right. It was the heat and excitement. I've never been so excited. I've never felt that way before."

She raised her face and stared up at me. There was a look in her eyes that jolted me right back on my heels.

I've been around long enough with women to know what that look meant. Right at that moment she wanted me as violently and as badly as any woman has ever wanted any man.

It was there in her eyes, and in the way her face had softened, and in the way the blood hammered in her throat. I could have taken her the way I could have taken any street corner pushover right there in that dimly lit passage if I had wanted to, but believe me that was the last thing on earth I wanted to do.

But the sight of that naked desire shocked me. She was such a wizened, ugly little thing that I hadn't ever thought of her in that way. I couldn't believe she could possibly have those kind of feelings; not her, not this skinny, brittle, bundle of bones. Not only did it seem impossible, it didn't even seem decent.

"Your cop pal has gone for the car," I said, stepping away from her; still holding her arm, but getting distance between us. I looked over

my shoulder down the passage as if I were looking for Leggit. I didn't want her to see the disgust on my face.

She pulled away from me.

"I'm all right now." Her voice was hoarse and unsteady. "The heat's awful here."

"Let's go and find him then."

I made a move to take her arm, but she avoided me.

"You have forgotten my winnings. Aren't you going to get them for me?"

"Lefty won't run away. I'll put you in the car first."

"Please get them now!"

There was a strident note in her voice. I looked sharply at her. She turned her head quickly, but not quickly enough. I don't think I have ever seen anyone look so unhappy. Her face was gaunt with despair and misery.

"Oh, please go!" she cried, and her voice sounded as if she were about to burst into tears.

I left her, wondering what the hell it was all about.

It wasn't until I was returning back up the aisle after collecting her winnings that a possible explanation of her misery suddenly struck me.

It struck me so violently, it brought me to a dead stop.

Had she expected me to make love to her in that sordid passage? Had that look of abject misery meant that she knew how unlovely she was and that she had sensed my disgust?

You're nuts, I told myself. You're crazy to think like that. Just because most women fall for you, that's no reason to think she has fallen for you.

Not her, with her seventy million bucks and her power. She wouldn't be such a mug as to fall in love with a bank clerk—or would she?

I went up the aisle at a run, but when I got to the passage there was no sign of her.

I went down to the exit, pushed open the door and stepped out into the still, hot night.

Leggit was walking towards me. I waited for him.

"Miss Shelley's gone home," he said, staring at me inquisitively from under the brim of his slouch hat. "She seemed upset."

"I guess the excitement and the heat..." I said and let the rest of the sentence trail away.

Could she have fallen in love with me? I was asking myself. Or had it been a sudden animal desire that had taken hold of her; a physical urge raised in her by the sight of two men slugging each other?

"Some fight," Leggit said, standing close to me, still staring.

"Some flop. I wouldn't have believed Slade would have fallen for that sucker punch," I said. "A guy with his experience."

Leggit took out a pack of cigarettes, offered me one and then lit mine and his.

"It's when a guy gets full of confidence he's wide open for a punch like that," he said. "I've seen it happen again and again in my racket. Some guy commits murder. He takes a lot of trouble and thought to cover up; fakes himself an alibi or maybe makes it look like it's been done by someone else. Then he imagines he's safe. But he isn't, Mr. Winters. A guy who thinks he's safe is wide open for a sucker punch. Just when he least expects it—wham! and he's down on his back, only he has something a damn sight worse coming to him than a busted jaw."

"I guess that's right," I said, not paying much attention. "Well, I'll be moving along, Lieutenant. Good night."

It wasn't until this morning that I remembered that conversation.

I realize now that Leggit had been talking sense.

A killer who thinks he is safe is wide open for a sucker punch. I should know. Just when I thought I had this whole thing neatly packaged with no loose ends—wham! Just the way he said it would happen.

When I got back to my apartment after the fight I found Glorie (never mind her other name), my blonde date who I had stood up and forgotten about when Vestal had invited herself to the fights, waiting for me.

She sat in an armchair, in scarlet underwear pants, a brassiere, and fishnet stockings, held up by frilly sky blue garters.

If you like them stacked like Jane Russell, as I do, then you would like Glorie. Her blonde silky hair was cut in a pageboy bob; her pert little face was no prettier than the average showgirl's, and equally as vacant and attractive.

"I've been waiting hours, darling," she said plaintively. "I'm afraid I've drunk nearly all your whisky."

"Well, give me what's left," I said, "and get into bed and keep quiet. I have some business to do first."

I went over to the telephone and called Vestal's number.

While I waited for the connection, Glorie strutted over to my wardrobe and selected from the half-a-dozen nylon nightdresses I always kept handy, a red one she had added to the collection herself.

"Not that for Pete's sake," I said. "It makes you look like a fireman."

She looked over her shoulder and leered.

"That's why I'm going to wear it. I'm going to act like a fireman tonight."

A voice came over the wire: "Miss Shelley's residence."

"This is Mr. Winters calling. Put me through to Miss Shelley."

"Hold on a moment, sir."

While I waited I watched Glorie cross the room to the bathroom and shut herself in.

The line crackled and Miss Dolan's voice said, "Yes, Mr. Winters?"

"I wanted Miss Shelley."

"I'm sorry, but Miss Shelley has retired."

"I couldn't talk to her for a moment?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That's a pity. Well, never mind. Would you tell her I called? I wanted to know if she had got over the heat and excitement of the fight."

"I will tell her."

"Thanks," I paused, then went on, "Oh, Miss Dolan, I still haven't thanked you for..."

The line went dead.

That was the second time she had hung up on me. I dropped the receiver back on its cradle, drank a little more whisky, while I frowned at the carpet. Miss Dolan was beginning to interest me.

Glorie came out of the bathroom in the gaudy red nightdress "Was that Vestal Shelley you were calling just now?" she asked, stretching out on the bed.

"It was," I said as I dialled Blakestone's home number.

"Was she the one you took to the fights instead of me?"

"She was."

Blakestone's voice growled, "Hallo?"

"Chad here." I said. "Listen, Ryan, we can go ahead. I'm arranging for a quarter of a million of bonds to be cashed tomorrow, and I'm opening a special account in Miss Shelley's name at the Western California Bank. Your job is to turn this money over and make her a monthly profit. We have a twenty thousand margin of loss. Go beyond that and you lose the account."

"I certainly won't go beyond a five thousand loss," Blakestone said. "I'll treat this account as if it were mine. Looks like you and I are going to make a little money."

"That's the idea. One more thing, Ryan. I want a weekly statement from you showing exactly what you are doing and intend to do. I'll leave the moves to you, but I want that statement every Monday morning. Is that clear?"

"Sure, you'll have it."

"Right. Start tomorrow. When you want any money, let me know."

"Leave it to me, Chad."

As I hung up, Glorie said, "Chad, darling..."

I sighed.

"I had forgotten about you. What is it?"

"Were you putting on an act just now or was that the McCoy?"

I looked over at her and grinned.

She was half sitting up, her pert little face alert, her baby blue eyes popping.

"You shouldn't have listened."

"You mean you have a quarter of a million?"

Glorie might be a nuisance sometimes, but the big thing about her is she can keep her mouth shut. I suddenly had a need to talk to someone about Vestal.

"Since the last time you were here," I said, "I have become Miss Shelley's financial adviser. With any luck I might make myself a little dough."

"I've always heard she was a bit of a terror," Glorie said, lying back on the bed again.

"So she is," I said lightly, "but apparently my manly charms have made quite a hit with her. She very nearly seduced me tonight."

Glorie lifted her head to stare at me.

"You wouldn't joke about a thing like that?"

"Certainly not. It was as much as I could do to hold her off. If she hadn't been such a hideous little monkey I would be in her silken couch by now, but fortunately, I'm not as hard pressed as all that."

"Why, you big, silly jerk!" Glorie exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. "I thought at least you had some brains in that handsome head of yours."

I was so surprised I nearly dropped the glass of whisky.

"What do you mean?"

"If a man worth millions tried to seduce me I wouldn't stop him," Glorie said. "Not if he had a wooden leg and buck teeth. I know she's skinny, but she isn't all that bad. Exactly how much is she worth?"

"I don't know. At least seventy millions, possibly more."

"Pheeee! Seventy millions! Did you say you talked her into letting you have a quarter of a million?"

"Yes; what's wrong with that? Now, move over I'm coming to bed."

"Not yet. Don't let's get off this subject, Chad. It fascinates me." Glorie said, climbing off the bed. She began to wander aimlessly around the room. "What exactly happened tonight? Tell me about it."

I told her about the fight, about Vestal's reactions, what had happened in the dimly lit passage and how she had run out on me.

Glorie perched herself on the table and folded her arms around her knees. She listened intently and without interruption.

"You called her just now?"

"I couldn't get past her secretary."

"You couldn't have tried very hard."

"I didn't. I left a message. That was enough, wasn't it?"

"A message? For Pete's sake! When will you learn a girl doesn't want a message? She wants something more tangible than a message. Never mind. You must send her some flowers. A box of white violets to open before she gets up will do."

"You think that's a good idea? Well, I don't. She might imagine I'm physically attracted to her, and that's the last thing on earth I'll ever be."

"What's the matter with you, Chad?" she asked, staring at me. "You slipping or something?"

"What's going on in that dopey brain of yours?"

"Not so dopey, darling." She reached for a cigarette and lit it. "I could use some of her money. I would love to have a luxury apartment on Park Avenue where you could come for a little relaxation when you've got her millions."

"Have you gone nuts?" I asked, staring at her.

"Don't you realize, Chad, that when you get to her age, when you're ugly and lonely and unloved as she is, and when a big, handsome, dashing guy like you comes along, she falls and falls and falls? Play your cards right, darling, follow my advice, and you will be married to her within a month."

"Married to her!" I yelled. "She's the last woman on earth I would ever marry. Marry her? Not on your life! Imagine being tied to that dried up, bad tempered little monkey for the rest of my life! You're crazy!"

Glorie stared steadily at me.

"Imagine being married to seventy million dollars for the rest of your life," she said softly. "Imagine that."

I started to say something, then stopped.

"Ah! The nickel is beginning to drop," Glorie said, watching me. "Suppose you are tied to her? It doesn't mean you can't get your fun elsewhere, does it? There'll always be me in a luxury apartment waiting to amuse you. Look at it this way; how long do you imagine you will control that quarter of a million? If you don't make love to her, she'll turn sour and frustrated. Then she'll give you hell. She'll snatch the money away from you at the first excuse. But marry her, Chad, and you'll be right in the gravy. Be nice to her; pet her, and there won't be anything you can't get out of her. I know you. You're irresistible once you get going."

"Shut up," I said. "I want to think about this."

Glorie obediently sat still, not speaking, but watching me.

I sat staring up at the ceiling for maybe ten minutes. Then I suddenly got up.

Glorie said, "Made up your mind, Chad?"

"I guess so," I said and grinned. "There's not much difference

between one woman and another in the dark, but seventy million bucks is seventy million bucks whichever way you look at it."

chapter six

I'm not going to waste time giving too many details of how I set about marrying Vestal. It is now common knowledge that I did marry her as Glorie had predicted, within a month of her giving me the idea.

Vestal played right into my hands. It was as Glorie had said. She was lonely and unloved. I happened to be the first good-looking, husky young man she had ever had personal contact with. The fact I wasn't scared of her also weighed tremendously in my favour.

I managed to dig up enough business queries to give me the excuse of seeing her at least once a day.

For the first four or five days it was strictly business, with a little relaxing when business was over—a drink or a short wander in the garden with her before I said I had work to do and left her.

Then very gently and almost imperceptibly, I began to increase the pressure.

I took her to Joe's restaurant out on Cape Point; a little dive that specialized in seafood. She had never been to a place like that before, and I could see she got a big bang out of it.

I drove her home in the moonlight with the car radio playing something soulful from Schubert. But I was very careful to treat her as if she were my sister.

No sister ever looked at a brother the way she looked at me when I said good night, and I knew I could have rushed my fences if I had wanted to, but I held back.

Ten days crawled past: ten of the dullest days of my life. We went out together every night. She was calling me Chad now, and I was calling her Vestal.

During those ten days I didn't see a sign of temper from her. She was really rather pathetic; trying so damned hard to rise above her physical disadvantages.

But why go on? All this isn't interesting, and it isn't important. I'm only telling you a little of it so you shouldn't imagine that all I had to do was to wave a wand and she married me.

Glorie and I discussed it after twenty long days had dragged by.

"I'm turning on the heat tomorrow night," I said. "We're going to the Barbecue restaurant, and on the way home, heaven help me, I intend to kiss her."

Glorie giggled.

"I wish I could see you do it."

The next night Vestal was like a seventeen-year old bobbysoxer with me. Glorie had said when she fell, she would fall and fall and fall, and

that's what she did.

I pulled up at the cliff head about three hundred yards from the tall iron gates guarding the estate. We had had a good dinner, and I had been drinking double whiskies all the evening. The moon was shining on the sea. There wasn't a sound to disturb us.

Vestal was gay and excited and adoring. She didn't even want me to go home.

I slid my arm around her and when she looked up, I kissed her. It was an effort and a bit of a failure, but at least it was a kiss. She held my hand in her cold little claws while she looked at me as if I were a Greek god.

"Can't we stay here and watch the moon all night?" she asked.

"I have work to do tomorrow. It's all right for you. You can be in bed all the morning. I have to earn a living."

"You don't have to," she said eagerly. "I have enough money for us both, Chad. You must leave that dreary old bank. I want to see more of you."

Well, here it was; just the way Glorie had said it would happen.

"You don't know what you're saying," I told her. "Now stop talking before you say something you'll be sorry for later. I shouldn't have kissed you."

"I wanted you to." Her brittle arms slid around my neck. "Be kind to me, Chad. I'm so lonely."

I held her against me.

"I'm crazy about you. If I had position and money, maybe it would be different, but I haven't." I pushed her away. "We'll cut this out. I'm taking you home."

"I must talk to you, Chad," she said feverishly.

"Okay, but we won't get anywhere. We shouldn't have started this."

"You must tell me the truth. Do I mean anything to you?"

"I don't know what you have done to me," I said, not looking at her. "I can't think of anything or anyone but you. You're in my blood. I'm crazy about you."

I had to stop. My mind boggled at the drivel I was talking, but it wasn't drivel to her. She sat looking at me, her eyes shining, her pinched little face transformed. They say love can make a woman look beautiful. Well nothing could make Vestal look beautiful, but right at that moment, in the soft light of the moon, she at least managed not to look ugly, and that was quite an achievement.

"You mean you—you want to marry me?" she said huskily.

"How can I?" I said curtly. "Let's stop this, Vestal." I started the car engine. "Marriage between us just wouldn't work. No matter how much I love you, I'll be damned if I will live on you."

I had got that line out of a soap opera Glorie and I used to listen to.

I remember how we had howled with laughter when the big ham had come out with it. But Vestal didn't howl with laughter. She put her hand on mine and squeezed it lovingly.

"I hoped you would say that. I'm so proud of you, Chad. It is really me you want, isn't it?"

"Let's stop talking about it, Vestal."

She shook her head.

"We're not going to spoil our happiness because my money stands in the way," she said. "I'll think of a way out. Come and see me tomorrow. You must leave this to me."

I certainly would leave it to her so long as she didn't put her seventy million dollars in a big sack and sink it in the ocean.

"Well, all right, I'll come and see you tomorrow," I said, shrugging. "I'll come because I can't keep away from you. But let's forget about it, Vestal; at least we can be friends."

The big ham on the radio had said that too.

"You must leave this to me, Chad," she said and leaned towards me. "Kiss me, darling."

Ugh!

By the following afternoon the thing was settled.

Vestal wasn't taking any chances. She had the whole thing cut and dried when I called on her just before lunch.

I'm not going to say I was completely successful, but without raising her suspicions, I couldn't press for more.

If it hadn't been for the fact that I was now obsessed with the idea of getting complete control of those seventy million dollars, I should have considered I had done pretty well for myself. As it was I drove back to my apartment, slightly dissatisfied and feeling I hadn't played my cards as well as I might.

I stretched out on my bed and thought it over.

She must have been damned eager to marry me. Knowing her reputation for meanness, her offer was really handsome, and as I have already said, if it hadn't been for those seventy million dollars that were haunting me, I should have been completely set back on my heels by her generosity.

She proposed to give me complete control of the quarter of a million she had already agreed to put at my disposal for investment purposes. She realized, she went on, that I wouldn't want to accept the money as a gift, and to get around that difficulty she proposed to regard it as a loan. To make me easy in mind (those were her words, not mine) I should pay her the usual bank interest on the loan, but any profit I might make investing the money should go to me instead of to her.

That was fair enough. It was a bit of a letdown that she imagined I

was so high minded that I wouldn't have accepted a loan without paying interest, but there it was.

A quarter of a million wasn't bad for a start. She then proposed that I should open offices and take over the whole of her affairs. She didn't want me to work office hours or anything like that. I was to engage a competent staff and I should just keep check on them; a couple of hours a day or something like that. The rest of the time (heaven help me!) I was to spend with her.

Having control of her estate meant that I should be able to make a nice income on the side for myself. It also meant that although I wouldn't have complete control of those seventy millions it would be possible to use them as stock and long term as securities against loans.

With Blakestone to help me, I should be making money far before long.

As a start it wasn't bad.

Vestal was in a tearing hurry to get married. Maybe she imagined I would change my mind. She fixed the date for the ceremony to take place in fourteen days' time.

I wanted a quiet wedding, but she wouldn't hear of it. This was her moment, and she wasn't going to be cheated out of it. She was determined to show the world that she had landed a fine handsome young husband, and the wedding was planned on fantastically lavish scale.

There were to be more than a thousand guests. Where she had dug up all the names from I'll never know. There were to be; fancy dress ball, four bands, a ballet on the lawn and fireworks and decorations that ran into thousands of dollars, and the honeymoon (heaven help me!), was to be on her luxury motor cruise in Venice.

The cruiser was sent off to Italy right away, and we were travel by air after the reception, picking up the cruiser at Naples and then going on to Venice.

The thought of spending six weeks with Vestal on a motor cruiser was something that haunted me, but I couldn't see any way of dodging it.

Luckily for me Vestal was so busy arranging the wedding, didn't see too much of her during the next fourteen days.

If she had a lot to do, so had I.

I found a set of offices on Crown Boulevard where all the swank firms had their accommodations. I persuaded both Tom Lead beater and Miss Goodchild to run the office for me.

By putting Leadbeater and Miss Goodchild in charge of the office, I assured myself of as much leisure as I needed to look after my own interests. That was the setup. My future looked pretty good. I was to be the husband of one of the richest women in the country. From a

badly paid bank clerk I'd suddenly jumped into luxury.

Right at that moment, I hadn't a care in the world, the trouble was, the moment didn't last long enough.

chapter seven

I'll skip the details of the wedding. I felt every guest was staring at me, wondering how I had managed to hook Vestal and her money, and I knew they were regarding me as a smooth adventurer. I could feel the atmosphere, although they were coolly polite to me.

We left Cliffside after midnight as Vestal wanted to see the fireworks.

We drove to the airport, and picked up the specially chartered plane that was to fly us to Paris, and from Paris to Rome.

The thought of spending six weeks alone with Vestal on board that motor cruiser still haunted me. Apart from the crew, a valet to look after me, Vestal's maid and Eve Dolan who would take care of the sightseeing arrangements, there was no one to take Vestal off my hands.

Eve Dolan had gone on ahead, and she was waiting at the Orly airport, Paris, when we arrived.

She handled everything, and we were quickly installed in one of the best suites in the Ritz hotel.

I postponed the inevitable honeymoon night, by taking Vestal out in the afternoon and evening and showing her the sights. We didn't get back to the hotel until four o'clock in the morning, and I insisted that she should sleep alone to get at least a few hours rest before we began the flight to Rome.

She was so deadbeat she didn't raise any objections, and I gained one more night before I need face up to the physical side of married life with her.

We left Paris soon after midday and flew to Rome. From Rome we motored to Naples. We left Eve to go aboard the motor cruiser while we went on to Sorrento where we were to have three days sightseeing.

Vestal wanted to see Vesuvius, Pompeii, Capri and of course the Blue and Green grottos.

The hotel was perched up on the mountainside, overlooking the Bay of Naples with a breathtaking view of the harbour, Vesuvius, and in the distance the lovely island of Capri.

This would have been a wonderful spot if I had Glorie with me: it was badly marred for me to have Vestal clinging on to my arm chattering incessantly. She behaved like any hick American tourist with an overpowering enthusiasm to see everything.

In the afternoon we went down to the hotel's private bathing beach and spent an hour or so in the sea. After a swim we lay on the hot sand, drinking iced coffee while she chattered happily.

Don't ask me what she talked about. I paid little attention to what she said, but suddenly she came out with something that stiffened me to attention.

"Chad, darling, let's go to our room early tonight. We've been married now three days, and—and—"

I forced a grin.

"I know, but there's been so much to see and do. Okay, we'll go up early."

It had to happen sooner or later. I couldn't go on putting it off. I remembered telling Glorie that there wasn't much difference between one woman and another in the dark. I had believed it at the time, but I found out how wrong I had been.

That night crawled past for us. Neither of us got much sleep. We lay in the darkness, side by side, strangers, and I cursed myself for marrying her. I told myself that this was an experience I didn't intend to repeat. I would give her my company, but I was going to sleep on my own in the future.

The next day Eve arrived with the Rolls and we drove to Pompeii.

Vestal was subdued and depressed, and so was I. We didn't say much to each other.

We went over the ruins at Pompeii quickly. Sightseeing has always bored me, and Vestal now seemed to have no heart for it.

As we drove back to the hotel, I said abruptly, "Are you all that keen on seeing Capri, Vestal? It'll be crammed with tourists, and it is much overrated. I was wondering if you wouldn't prefer to go to the cruiser and get away from the crowds."

She nodded without looking at me.

"All right. I don't mind."

I was surprised she should agree so readily as she had talked incessantly about how much she was looking forward to seeing Capri. I think she must have realized this sightseeing business was boring me stiff, and she was pathetically anxious to please me.

Eve was in front with the chauffeur. I leaned forward and told her we had decided to go straight to the cruiser and asked her to drop off at the hotel, settle our bill and have our things packed.

She nodded without looking around. I wondered what she thought of this sudden change of plan.

The car stopped outside the hotel and she got out. I looked curiously at her as the car began to move off, leaving her standing in the hot sunshine. She wore a plain grey silk dress, a white, wide-brimmed hat and green sunglasses. She looked trim and neat, and I suddenly became aware of her long beautiful legs and small slender feet. It came as a shock to me that whereas I had been imagining there would be no interesting woman on the cruiser, and that my time

would have to be spent listening to Vestal's vapid chatter, it seemed possible now that perhaps this girl might prove an interesting companion. At least, she wasn't skinny and ugly, even though she might be a soured spinster.

The cruiser was a five-hundred ton job, glittering white, with sun awnings and every conceivable luxury. Our suite comprised of a large bedroom with a double bed, two bathrooms, a dressing room in which was a bed, and a big stateroom.

"Do you like it?" Vestal asked, looking anxiously at me.

"It's fine," I said. I peered into the dressing room. "I'll sleep in here, Vestal. I'm an uneasy sleeper and there's no point in disturbing you. We can leave the door open between the rooms so we can talk when we're in bed."

I was pretending to examine the dressing table fitments as I spoke, and I had my back turned to her, but I watched her in the mirror.

She literally sagged when I said that. Not only her body sagged, but her face sagged as well. She looked suddenly older, more gaunt and more ugly.

"I—I thought you might like to sleep here."

I turned to face her. This had to be stopped and stopped with finality.

"I value the companionship side of marriage much more than the physical. I'm like you, Vestal. I think the physical side of love is much overrated. Luckily you and I don't need to bother about...'

She went red, then white.

"But, Chad..."

"I guess I'd better see Williams and get him to unpack my trunk," I said, moving across the room. "Shall we meet in the bar for a drink in half an hour?"

"Yes."

Her voice was pitched so low I scarcely heard it. I kept on, went into the dressing room and closed the door.

Williams, my valet, was already unpacking. I stripped off my clothes, took a shower, changed into a white shirt and white flannel trousers, then went up on deck.

I hung over the rail and smoked a cigarette. I was feeling uneasy. I knew I was treating her badly. She couldn't help being ugly and all, but it was impossible for me to have physical contact with her I saw the small launch coming across the bay, and caught sight of Eve Dolan standing by the helmsman. I watched her as she ran up the short staircase to the main deck. I strolled over to her.

"No snags?" I asked.

Her face was expressionless as she turned. The big doughnut sunglasses completely screened her eyes.

"The luggage is all here, Mr. Winters. Are we leaving for Venice then?"

"First thing tomorrow morning."

She nodded and turned away.

"Don't go yet. Come and have a drink."

She paused, half-turned.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Winters, but I haven't the time."

She crossed the deck to the companion staircase.

For the first time I noticed her hips moved in a slow languorous roll as she walked: the way I like a woman's hips to move.

I stood looking after her, suddenly aware of a slight quickening of my pulse as something within me was coming awake.

After dinner that night Vestal and I went up on deck. Vestal put on dance records on the radiogram. She suggested nervously I might like to dance. She wasn't a good dancer, and after a couple of records I said it was too hot to continue and we subsided in basket chairs. I called to the steward to bring me a brandy.

It was a magnificent night. The stars were like diamonds in a purple sky, and the lights along the bay were something to see.

With the right woman this would have been the most romantic spot in the world, but with Vestal it was just water, sky, lights and heat.

Conversation petered out entirely, and I began to think of Eve. I wondered what she was doing. Being alone on the ship couldn't be much fun for her. I wondered what she would do with herself when we reached Venice. I had a sudden urge to find her and talk to her; to get better acquainted with her.

I put down my brandy glass and stood up.

"I'm just going to stretch my legs," I said. "I won't be long."

Vestal started to get up, dropped her bag and cigarette case.

"Don't bother," I said curtly. "You rest here. You must be tired."

I picked up her bag and cigarette case and put them on the table and smiled at her.

She slumped back in her chair, looking up at me.

"I'm not tired."

"Of course you are. You're looking worn out. Why don't you turn in and get a good night's rest? You've been late every night since we left Cliffside."

She flinched when I said she looked worn out, and turned her face quickly into the shadow.

"Yes. I might go to bed."

"I won't be long, but in case you're asleep when I come in, I'll say good night now." I patted her shoulder, then walked away across the deck.

As soon as I was out of the light, I looked back.

She sat motionless, looking down at her hands. She looked desperately unhappy and I grimaced angrily. This could be trickier than I had imagined. The years we had to spend together suddenly stretched out in a continuous depressing picture in my mind.

I tried to assure myself that it would be all right once we got back to Cliffside. She would have her friends, her bridge, her lectures and her social activities. I should have my work and Glorie. It had been a mistake to have come on this long trip with no one else to relieve the monotony or to help me entertain Vestal.

I went down to the lower deck. It was dark down there; lit only by the moon. I heard a rumble of voices from the bar and glancing through the porthole I spotted the captain and the purser playing gin rummy together while the steward looked on.

I was wondering if I should join them when I caught sight of a movement ahead of me.

Eve came out of the lounge and stood for a moment framed in the lighted doorway, then she crossed over to the rail. As I moved forward to greet her, the figure of a man came out of the lounge and joined her.

I stepped back out of sight. I recognized the man as Rollinson, the second officer.

I watched them for several minutes, aware of a violent and inexplicable feeling of jealousy. I had imagined she would be lonely and on her own. I had planned to keep her company, and now it was I who was alone and without anyone to talk to.

Rollinson kept edging closer to her as he talked, and I saw him reach out and take her hand, but she didn't respond. She moved her hand away sharply.

After a long pause, he said, "Let's dance. There's no one in the lounge. The skipper's in the bar."

"I don't think I will."

"Oh, come on, Eve; be a good sport," he urged. "I haven't danced for weeks."

She lifted her shoulders.

"Well, all right. I don't want to be late though."

I watched them return to the lounge. A moment or so later the radio started up, playing swing.

Feeling angry and jealous, I went to my cabin.

I opened the door softly, entered without turning on the light and crept across the room to the communicating door that stood open.

I remained motionless by the door, listening.

Out of the darkness came a whimpering sound that made me stiffen. It was Vestal, weeping.

I closed the door soundlessly, undressed in the dark and got into

bed.

Even with the door shut, I could still hear her muffled sobbing.

It was a long time before I finally fell asleep.

I woke around six o'clock. The sun streamed through the porthole and I decided to get up. After a shave, I put on my swim trunks and went up on deck.

The sea looked blue and inviting and I dived off the rail. As I swam I caught sight of a white-capped head some thirty yards in front of me.

For a moment I thought it was Vestal taking an early swim, but the swimmer turned on her back, and I saw it was Eve.

I increased my speed and overtook her.

"Hallo there," I said, treading water. "You're up early."

"Good morning, Mr. Winters. I was just going back."

"Keep me company. Let's swim out to that raft."

I was looking at her curiously. Without her glasses she was almost beautiful.

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I want my breakfast. I have a lot of work to get through this morning."

She began to swim towards the cruiser.

I turned and caught up with her.

"Okay. We can have breakfast together."

"Mrs. Winters wouldn't like that. I am a member of her staff."

"So what? You're a member of my staff too. Besides, Mrs. Winters is asleep. I don't like eating alone."

"I do," she said shortly and increased her pace.

We swam to the cruiser without saying anything. She hoisted herself up the rope ladder that dangled over the side.

She was in a white one-piece swimsuit, and as she climbed the ladder, water dripping from her, I saw her body as if without clothes.

The sight of her shape under that wet, clinging swimsuit turned my mouth dry. It stopped me going up the ladder after her.

I lay on my back in the water and stared up at her.

She ducked under the rail and crossed the deck briskly without looking back, and disappeared into a cabin not far from the lower deck lounge.

I became aware that my heart was pounding.

I suddenly wanted her as I had never wanted any other woman before.

The next three days and nights were torture to me. I was haunted by this girl. I had her in my mind every hour of the day and most of the night.

I don't know if she sensed the change in me, but she avoided me so cleverly that I only saw her for brief moments when Vestal was with

me.

Vestal nearly drove me crazy with her pathetic attempts to interest me.

She kept with me like my shadow. Every time I got up to pace the deck, she got up too. I could have strangled her, although I knew she was just trying her best to keep me company.

On the second evening I got away from her and went down to the lower deck, hoping to corner Eve, but I spotted her sitting in a deck chair with Rollinson and the purser on the deck at her feet, both trying to outshine the other in tall stories.

As I went back to the upper deck, jealous and furious, Vestal appeared out of the darkness.

"Where have you been, Chad, dear? I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Can't you leave me alone for one second?" I snarled to her. "I've had you in my hair all the goddam day!" I pushed past her and went to my cabin and shut myself in.

I knew I shouldn't have spoken to her like that, but my nerves couldn't take any more of her.

I undressed, put on my pyjamas and dressing gown and lay on the bed.

After a few minutes, I heard Vestal come into her cabin.

If only this dreary honeymoon could come to an end and I could get back to Little Eden, I thought as I reached for a cigarette. Once back in Little Eden I was sure I could handle the situation.

"Chad."

I raised my head, frowning.

Vestal was calling from the other room.

"What is it?"

"I want you."

I hesitated; then shrugging, I got off the bed and opened the door.

She was sitting before her dressing table. Her pinched face was set. She looked straight at me, and I was disconcerted to find that I couldn't meet her direct stare.

"Come in, Chad. I want to talk to you."

"I was just going to sleep," I grumbled, but I came in and sat on the bed.

"What is it?"

She swung around so she could face me.

"That's what I want to know," she said, her hands turning into fists. "Aren't you happy, Chad? Are you sorry you married me?"

I hadn't expected a frontal attack and I was startled. I had named her for her seventy million dollars, and I had lost sight of that fact while I had been with her. This question brought me up with a jerk.

"Happy? Why, of course I am. What makes you think I'm not?"

She stared fixedly at me.

"By the way you behave. You act as if you—you hated me."

"Why, Vestal!"

I got off the bed and went over to her. This was dangerous. I cursed myself for showing my hand so plainly.

"No, don't touch me," she said, shrinking away. "You've spoilt our honeymoon. I'm going home. I don't want you to come with me if you are going to behave as you've been behaving. I'm not going to be treated like this! I won't have it!"

"Don't talk nonsense!" I said sharply. "Of course I haven't spoilt the honeymoon. Can I help it if all this damned sightseeing bores me stiff? It's a cockeyed way of spending a honeymoon, anyway. When two people are in love they don't have to go crawling around ruins all day."

She looked quickly at me.

"You don't act as if you were in love with me," she said fiercely. "You don't even sleep with me!"

I was getting scared now. I had visions of her threatening me with a divorce. I had to get out of this spot somehow.

"Why, Vestal, the way you acted I thought you didn't want me to sleep with you," I said.

"How can you say a thing like that?" she exclaimed and got to her feet. "You said the physical side of marriage meant nothing to you. You're just telling lies!"

"Now look here, Vestal, I won't have you talking like that. There's been a misunderstanding. That night was a flop, and you know it. It was a flop because you acted as if I were repulsive to you. Can you wonder I moved into another room?"

"You repulsive to me?" she said, turning. "Oh, Chad, how can you say such a thing? I love you."

"That was the impression I got. I thought I was being considerate to you by going into the other room. You mean you want me to share this room with you?"

She was so anxious for it to be all right with us she wouldn't let herself doubt me.

"Of course I do." She began to tremble. "I want us to be everything to each other. Don't you?"

Did I—hell!

"Of course. Well, damn it! We've been acting like a couple of fools. I thought you were disappointed in me. I thought you wanted to be left alone. I'm sorry, Vestal, but you did give that impression."

"Oh, Chad."

She began to cry.

I forced myself to go to her and take her in my arms.

"It's all right, Vestal. Don't get upset."

I thought of all that money. What made me imagine I shouldn't have to earn it the hard way?

"Do you really love me, Chad?"

"Of course I do."

I picked her up and carried her across to the bed. I could feel her bony fingers digging into my shoulders.

The first thing I did was to turn off the light.

chapter eight

From that night onwards I began to earn my right to those seventy million dollars the hard way. I began also to hate Vestal as I didn't think it possible to hate anyone.

Every minute of the day and night was a calculated act for me. I had to watch myself all the time. I couldn't afford to let her suspect again how she revolted me. I knew once this possessive love of hers for me died, she would become frustrated, spiteful and dangerous.

It might have been easier if Eve hadn't been on board. I thought of her continually, but I had no possible chance of getting her to myself. I had Vestal in my hair from the time I got up to the time I fell asleep.

It was torture to have to sit on the upper deck with her and bear Eve talking to the ship's officers while they swam with her in the tarpaulin pool they had rigged up on the lower deck. I could imagine her in that white swimsuit, and yet I couldn't go down there and watch her.

We reached Venice two days after our supposed reconciliation and the cruiser dropped anchor in the Canale di San Marco.

Vestal and I, Eve, Vestal's maid and Williams, my valet, took the launch up the Grande Canale to the famous Gritti Hotel.

We had a suite overlooking the Grande Canale; two bedrooms, a big sitting room, two bathrooms and rooms for the staff.

I used the second bedroom as a dressing room, and as soon as I had taken a shower and changed, I joined Vestal in the sitting room where she was standing on the balcony looking down the Canale as excited as a child at her first party.

"Isn't this marvellous, Chad?" she exclaimed. "Look at those gondolas! Look at those cute palaces! I've never seen anything like this—it's wonderful!"

If it hadn't been for her it would have been wonderful.

"Shall we take a gondola after lunch and explore?" she asked, turning to smile at me.

"Sure," I said. "Come on; let's eat and get out."

We spent the entire afternoon and evening exploring. We visited the San Marco church, the Doges Palace, the prison and we crossed the Bridge of Sighs. We took a gondola over to San Giorgia Maggiore, and Vestal raved over the paintings by Tintoretto which were just paintings to me.

We got back to the hotel an hour before dinner, and while Vestal went up to change, I sat on the balcony of the deserted main lounge and watched the evening activity on the Grande Canale.

I spotted Eve come into the lounge and I got up and went over to her.

"Hallo there," I said. "What have you been doing this afternoon?"

She looked at me through her hard, rimless glasses. She had the bluest eyes I have ever seen. She was wearing her plain, severe, grey frock, and I realized it had been cut to hide her figure. Looking at her, I would never have known what a shape she had under that dress.

"I've been arranging for Mrs. Winters to visit the glass factory at Murano."

"Oh, hell! When's that to be?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

I moved a little closer to her.

"Will you be coming?"

"Oh, no." She turned away, and began to move towards the exit.

"Hey, wait," I said, and caught hold of her wrist.

She jerked free and looked back over her shoulder at me.

For a long moment we stared at each other.

Just for a split second I saw something in her eyes that sent my heart leaping and my blood hammering. It was that same urgent, naked desire I had seen in Vestal's eyes; only much more urgent and much more naked. It wasn't a figment of my imagination. It was there: the look that sometimes comes into a woman's eyes to tell a man she can be had.

It was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Keep away from me!" she said, and she made the words sound as if she were speaking through clenched teeth.

She walked quickly out of the lounge and up the stairs.

I stood motionless, my heart pounding and that ripping, clawing desire for her gnawing at me.

But I knew I wasn't the only one who had that feeling.

She had it too.

Vestal joined me in the bar.

"Oh, Chad, darling," she said as we sat down, "I thought it would be kind if we took Eve out with us tonight. It would be fun to go in a gondola to the Lido. But if you rather we didn't take her, we won't."

I had to make an effort to keep my face expressionless.

"I don't mind if you want her along." I reached forward and patted her hand. "Nice of you to have thought of her."

She loved that.

"Well, it can't be much fun for her," she said patronizingly. "I'm fond of Eve, but she's so terribly drab. I've often told her to smarten herself up, but she doesn't seem to have the slightest idea how to dress."

I looked at the diamonds and the unsuitable white gown that showed off her skinny neck and shoulders. When it came to ideas of

how to dress she was in a class of her own.

After dinner we went out to the gondola station where Eve waited for us. She was in a black evening dress with a high collar and sleeves. It was almost as if she had chosen it deliberately for its dowdiness. With her scraped back hair and her glasses she looked like a poor relation beside Vestal's glitter.

We had a cabin gondola. Vestal and I sat side by side, and Eve sat on one of the side seats, away from us.

We began the long, slow journey up to the Lido. Vestal chattered, but neither Eve nor I said much.

I was aware of her in the semi-darkness all the time. I could feel a hidden sensuality coming from her like a radio wave, and I would have given ten years of my life to have been rid of Vestal and have had Eve to myself. I couldn't understand it. It wasn't that Eve was anything to look at. It was a physical thing; reaching out to me, jogging my memory into life of the picture of her climbing up the ladder from the sea.

We left the gondola at the vaporetta station and took a carriage up to the hotel.

Vestal wanted to dance. She forgot her good intentions towards Eve once we got into the ballroom, and left her sitting at a table alone while she danced with me.

I could have strangled her for she was a poor dancer, but I knew it would be unsafe to remind her Eve was being left alone.

We returned to the table after twenty minutes dancing, and Vestal must have realized it couldn't have been fun for Eve to sit so long alone.

"Chad, darling, you must dance with Eve."

Eve looked up quickly.

"Thank you, Mrs. Winters, but I don't dance. I'm quite happy to sit here and watch you dance."

"You don't dance?" Vestal said scornfully. "My dear girl, you should learn. Well, if you don't, you don't." She turned to me. "I love this thing they're playing. Don't let's miss it."

It went on like that for the next hour. The hands of my watch crawled on, and finally, a little before midnight, she decided it was time to return to the hotel.

The journey seemed endless. Vestal chattered all the time. Eve said nothing. I filled in the few gaps with flatfooted remarks.

After Eve had thanked Vestal for giving her such an enjoyable evening and had gone to her room, Vestal went to the open window and looked down at the dark waters of the Canale.

"I feel sorry for that girl," she said. "She's so out of everything."

"Why should you worry?" I said, as I began to undress. "She's good

at her work, isn't she?"

"She's wonderful. Before she came I was nearly driven crazy by inefficient fools."

"How long has she been with you?"

"About three years. In a way, I suppose it is just as well she does look dowdy. If she had looks she might get married, then I'd lose her."

"Well, I guess you'll lose her sooner or later."

"I don't think so," Vestal said, coming away from the window. "I've told her I would remember her in my will. Servants always stick to you if you tell them that. At one time Hargis wanted to leave, but after I had told him he was going to get a legacy, he changed his mind."

I was careful to conceal my sudden interest.

"What are you leaving Miss Dolan?"

She looked sharply at me, but I had made my question sound casual.

"Just a few hundreds."

"Does she know the amount?"

Vestal giggled.

"Oh no. I expect she imagines she's going to get much more than she is. They always do."

"You'd better get into bed. It's late."

Long after Vestal had fallen asleep, I lay in the darkness, brooding.

So she had made a will.

I wondered how much of her money she was planning to give away in legacies and how much to charity. I wondered how much would come to me.

Up to this moment I had been planning to persuade her to let me control her seventy million dollars. I knew it would be a long and tricky process, and it might not come off. But now, at the mention of her will, it suddenly dawned on me that there might come a time when I would get the money without restrictions, and without Vestal to watch what I did with it.

Don't jump to the conclusion that it was at this moment I planned to murder her. I never thought of murder, but it did flash through my mind that she might fall ill; she might meet with an accident; she might die.

What an easy way out for me if she did! No planning, no persuading, no disappointments, no frustrations and no more playacting.

If she died. . . .

We spent the next afternoon in the violent heat of a glass factory at Murano, watching men fashion miracles out of molten glass, and we were glad to get back to the cool of our sitting room.

"I guess I'll take a shower," I said. "That factory was too damned hot."

"Yes, it was hot," Vestal returned, sitting limply in a chair. She held her head in her hands. "It's given me a headache."

"Have a drink?"

"No, I don't think I will. I'll just sit for a moment and rest. I'll be all right. What shall we do tonight, Chad?"

"Whatever you like. Want a gondola?"

"Let's decide after dinner."

I went into the bathroom and took a shower. After I had changed I returned to the sitting room. Vestal wasn't there. I looked for her in the bedroom. I found her lying on the bed, her face drawn and white.

"What's the matter?" I asked, bending over her. "Don't you feel well?"

"I have a terrible headache and I feel sick."

I looked down at her. I could find no pity for her. She looked hideous and awful.

"I'm sorry. I expect the heat has upset you. Why not go to bed?"

"I've taken some Veganin. I'll be all right in a little while."

"Well, I guess I'll have a drink. You take it easy. I'll be up in a few minutes."

I went along to Eve's room and knocked on the door. She opened the door and looked inquiringly at me. She wasn't wearing her glasses, and although her scraped back hair still gave her the spinsterish look, there was that hint of beauty I had seen before.

"Mrs. Winters has a bad headache," I said. "You might see if you can do anything for her."

"I'll go at once."

"She may feel like going to bed," I said, aware that my voice was a little unsteady. "If she does, will you keep me company tonight?"

Her blue eyes were completely expressionless as she said, "She will want me to stay with her."

"She may not. If she doesn't, will you meet me outside the San Marco at nine?"

"I don't think I shall be able to," she said and moving past me, she walked quickly along the corridor to Vestal's room.

I went down to the bar, ordered a double whisky and drank it slowly.

My hand was shaking. I was surprised the barman didn't notice the way my heart was pounding.

No other woman had ever made me feel like this. I knew instinctively that Eve would be waiting for me at nine. The pattern was falling into place. This night was to be the beginning of our destiny together. I felt it.

A little later I went up to Vestal's room.

Her maid met me at the door.

"Mrs. Winters is sleeping," she said. "She doesn't wish to be disturbed."

"Look after her," I said. "If she wants to know, tell her I've gone for a walk."

At ten to nine, I left the hotel and walked along the waterfront, over the Ponte della Paglia, past the Doges' Palace to the square of San Marco.

There was a big crowd in the square, moving slowly around the arcade, looking at the brilliantly lit shops, or sitting at tables, listening to an orchestra that played outside one of the many cafes.

I stood before the great doors of San Marco. Against the purple sky I could see the four bronze horses that stood sentinel on the roof of the basilica.

I was one of many people standing before the building, and I looked anxiously from right to left for Eve.

There was no sign of her, but I waited—sure she would come.

The bronze giants on the Clock Tower were striking the bell for nine o'clock when I felt a hand touch mine.

I turned quickly, my heart skipping a beat.

A girl in a white evening dress, held up by a narrow strap of brilliants stood close to me: a dark-haired beauty whose blue eyes glittered as if a fire burned behind them.

"Why, Eve...I didn't recognize you."

I stared at her.

Her hair was dressed so it framed her pale face and it reached nearly to her shoulders and curled inwards.

"There's a gondola waiting," she said, and she took my arm and moved through the crowd to the waterside.

I went with her down the steps to the cabin gondola.

The gondolier raised his hat and bowed to us as we slipped into the dark little cabin.

The curtains were drawn. We were suddenly in a gently moving, dark little world of our own. There were thick cushions spread on the floor and she lay down, her hands supporting her head while she looked up at me.

I knelt beside her.

"I've been waiting for this moment ever since I saw you swimming," I said. "It has been a long wait."

"Don't talk now," she said, her voice husky. "Please don't talk now."

Across the waters came the sound of the bronze giants striking the half-hour.

The gondola bobbed gently in the ripples left by the vaporetta as it

steamed from San Marco to the Lido.

"Half past nine," Eve said, raising her head. "We haven't much longer together." She lifted one of the curtains and called something in Italian to the gondolier. "We must go back now."

"We have the whole night before us," I said, pulled her down beside me. "We're not going back so soon. There's no need to."

"There is. You can stay out if you want to, but I must get back. I know her so much better than you do. When she wakes, she'll ask for me, and I've got to be there. She won't sleep longer than an hour."

"But I want to talk to you. There's so much I want to know about you."

She turned to look up at me.

"We have no time to talk. We may never have time to talk. We have only time for hurried love. You don't want her to find out, do you?"

I thought of those seventy million dollars.

"No."

"Nor do I. Listen, Chad, if you don't do exactly what I say, this stops, and it will never happen again. I'm not going to lose my job for a love affair. Do you understand?"

"This is more than a love affair. I'm crazy about you."

She touched my face with cool slender fingers.

"Yes; and I'm crazy about you too, but I won't take risks. You must leave it to me to find another opportunity. Do you understand?"

"Well, I found this opportunity," I said sharply. "As soon as she got that headache I thought of you. It was I who fixed the meeting."

"Was it?" She laughed softly. "But who gave her the headache, Chad? Without the headache you couldn't have done anything."

I stared at her; a cold, creepy sensation ran up my spine.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. This isn't the first time she has had a headache. When I can bear her no longer I give her something. It's harmless; it just makes her feel sick and gives her a headache."

"Are you sure it's harmless?" I said, not liking this at all.

"Of course. A doctor friend of mine gave it to me. It's quite harmless — it won't kill her, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I do mean, Eve. It's dangerous to monkey with drugs."

"Don't you want it to happen again then?"

I stared down into the glittering blue eyes. There was something in the set, determined face that startled me.

"You must hate her, Eve."

"More than anyone else in the world," she said softly. "More even than you do."

"What has she done to you?"

"Nothing; nothing at all. In fact she's always been as nice to me as

she could be to anyone. It's just that she has everything I want, and she's not worthy of having it."

"Then why the hell do you work for her?"

"Why did you marry her, Chad?"

"That's different."

"It isn't. You married her for her money. I work for her so I can live in the shadow of her luxury." She glanced out of the cabin window. "We'll only be a few more minutes. Kiss me, Chad."

I held her to me, my mouth on hers.

I didn't believe this was happening to me. For the first time in my life I was in love with a woman. Eve was in my blood, like a virus, burning me up.

"No more, darling."

She pushed me away.

"We've got to face facts, Chad," she went on as she tidied her hair. "We may never get another opportunity like this again. This is safe. Chad, but it won't be safe when we get back to the cruiser. You don't know her like I do. She's suspicious and jealous, and she will ferret out any secret."

"I'll think of something. It'll be easier when we get back to Cliffside."

"Oh no, it won't. It will be much more difficult. She expects me to be within call every minute of the day. She'll expect you to be with her at night. It will be almost impossible for us to meet alone."

"I'll think of some way."

"It's got to be safe or it will have to stop. I mean that."

"It'll be safe."

The gondola slid up against the San Marco steps.

"Let me go first, Chad." She leaned forward and kissed me. "I love you."

I watched her slip out of the cabin. I waited a minute or so, then I got out of the gondola, paid off the gondolier and walked slowly back to the hotel.

I realized that by falling in love with Eve I was making my life with Vestal impossible. I didn't dare think of the future.

At that moment as I thought of Eve's beauty and passion and her love for me my only hope was that Vestal might die. If she died my problem was solved.

Even then it never entered my mind to murder her.

chapter nine

As the weeks crawled past, I began to realize the truth of what Eve had said. It seemed impossible to find another opportunity to get her alone.

After three days, my nerves were stretched to breaking point. On the sixth day, I decided to take action.

While I was in the bathroom with the shower going, I telephoned Eve's room.

Vestal was in bed. I knew the danger. She had an extension telephone on the bedside table, and she could easily listen in to our conversation.

I didn't think she could possibly hear me above the sound of the running shower. I whispered Eve's number to the desk clerk, and while I waited, I listened intently for any telltale click to warn me Vestal had lifted her receiver.

Eve's voice said, "Yes?"

"You've got to do something for tonight," I said. "I can't go on..."

I heard the click of Vestal's telephone. Eve must have heard it too for she quickly hung up.

"Is that you phoning, Chad?" Vestal asked.

I could have strangled her if I hadn't been so shaken.

"Chad!"

"You've cut me off," I said curtly. "I was calling Miss Dolan."

"Why?" Her voice sharpened.

I hung up, turned off the shower and walked into the bedroom.

Vestal was sitting up in bed, her pinched face suspicious.

"Why were you calling Eve?"

I managed a stiff smile. It couldn't have looked very convincing. It felt terrible.

"I was arranging a surprise for you," I said, and came over to sit on the foot of the bed. "Why must you be so inquisitive?"

"A surprise? Why did Eve hang up so quickly?"

"She didn't. You cut us off."

"It sounded as if she hung up."

"For the love of Mike, don't get worked up about it! I thought you'd like a swim at the Lido this morning. I was about to ask Miss Dolan to get a motorboat for us."

She gave me an odd, doubting stare.

"I would rather I gave orders to Eve, Chad, if you please. If there is anything you want, let me know and I'll see Eve does it."

"Just as you like," I said, trying to sound casual. I got to my feet. "I'll

finish shaving."

I returned to the bathroom and shut myself in. I sat on the edge of the bath and lit a cigarette. I was shaking with rage. Had Eve heard my message? Would she do something? I had to see her again.

She did do something.

Just after dinner, Vestal was taken ill. She complained of a headache, and a little later, she became violently sick.

"You'd better get to bed right away," I said. "You sat in the sun too long this morning. I told you it was too hot, but you wouldn't listen."

"Tell Eve to come to me," Vestal said, sitting on the bed, holding her head in her hands. "Don't bother about me, Chad. Go out and enjoy yourself. Just tell Eve to come to me at once."

I found Eve in her room.

"Thank God you did it!"

I went to her and took her in my arms. We strained against each other, my mouth crushed against hers.

Then Eve pushed me away.

"We mustn't."

"She's been sick and she wants you."

"I'll give her a couple of Veganin, and as soon as she's asleep I'll meet you at San Marco. Get a cabin gondola, Chad."

"I thought I was going out of my mind, waiting. If you hadn't done something..."

"You mustn't talk like that," she said sharply. "I warned you. This could happen again and again."

"I can't live without you, Eve!"

She pushed past me to the door.

"I must go to her."

"Get her to sleep quickly."

"I will."

She went along the corridor to Vestal's room.

I waited half an hour in the lounge, then went out to the gondola station.

The gondolier who had taken us before came up. He raised his hat and bowed.

I nodded and pointed to his gondola.

He cast it loose and rowed around to the San Marco steps.

I paced up and down on the waterfront and waited.

I waited an hour. Every minute of that hour was a torture to me.

Finally as Eve didn't come, I decided to see what was happening. I paid off the gondolier and went hurriedly back to the hotel.

I listened outside Vestal's door. I heard Eve's voice. Sick with rage, I turned the handle and went in.

Vestal was in bed. A handkerchief dipped in lavender water lay

across her forehead.

Eve sat near her. She was reading aloud from a book of poems.

I was glad there was only one shaded lamp on, otherwise Vestal must have seen the fury on my face.

"Is that you, Chad?" she murmured.

"Yes. How are you?"

"A little better. The Veganin has taken my headache away."

Eve stared down at the book. Her face was pale.

"Hadn't you better try to sleep?" I said, coming to the foot of the bed, but keeping out of the direct light.

"In a little while. Eve's reading to me. Her voice soothes me."

I didn't dare look at Eve.

"I think you should settle down now. It's getting on for ten. You don't want to be tired tomorrow."

"Not yet. Chad, darling, would you mind sleeping in the other room tonight?"

My heart gave a sudden leap.

Eve and I could wait until she went to sleep, and then have the whole night together!

"Why no. I think I should. I don't want to disturb you."

She opened her eyes and looked at me.

"Thank you, darling. I knew you wouldn't mind. I've asked Eve to sleep here. She says she doesn't mind sleeping on the couch. It's nice to have her just in case I feel ill during the night."

Four more days crawled by.

How I concealed my feelings from Vestal during those four days and nights I shall never know.

On the fourth night I couldn't stand the strain any longer. We went up to change for dinner. I skipped my shower, flung on my evening things and was ready to go down before Vestal had even made up her mind what she was going to wear.

I put my head around her door.

"I'm just going down for a drink. Meet me in the bar."

She looked surprised.

"How quick you've been, Chad."

"You're being damned slow," I said, smiling, and what an effort it was to dig up that smile. "I'll have a Martini waiting for you."

"I won't be long, darling."

I closed the door and went down the corridor to Eve's room. I turned the handle and went in.

Eve was adjusting her stockings before the wall mirror. She had on only blue underwear pants and a brassiere.

"Chad!"

"You must give her that stuff again! Give it to her tomorrow!"

She backed away from me.

"Have you gone crazy?" she said fiercely. "She'll know you've been here."

"She's still changing. She'll be another half-hour yet. I told her I was going to the bar."

I went to her and slipped my arms round her. The feel of her body against mine set me on fire.

"No! Can't you see how dangerous this is? Let me go!"

"You've got to do something, Eve! This is driving me out of my mind. Give her the stuff tomorrow."

"It's no use. It won't work anymore. If she's ill, I'll have to stay with her. She said so. It's no use!"

"Goddam her! What are we going to do then?"

"I warned you. You've got to keep away from me. I won't lose this job because of you!"

A tap sounded on the door.

We looked at each other. I felt the blood leave my face.

Eve grabbed my arm and shoved me across the room and behind the long window drapes that were half-closed.

The whole thing happened so quickly she was back by the dressing room as the door opened.

"I thought I heard voices," Vestal said.

"Why no, Mrs. Winters. I was humming to myself," Eve said quietly.

Her voice was steady and unflustered. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I didn't mean to disturb you," Vestal said. "Could I borrow your scent spray? Mine has broken."

"Of course. I'll empty it."

"Don't do that. I like the perfume you wear. It'll be a nice change."

I stood against the wall behind the curtain, feeling cold sweat run down my back. To be caught in this room with Eve clad only in her underwear would finish me. I cursed myself for being such a crazy fool to have taken such a risk. Eve had been right. This ghastly little bitch had a nose for secrets. Did she suspect anything? Had she broken her scent spray or had it been an excuse to surprise Eve?

"Thank you so much," Vestal went on. "I must hurry. Mr. Winters is waiting for me in the bar."

I heard the door close.

I didn't move. My heart was hammering against my side. I had been one jump away from losing seventy million dollars. The thought made me feel ill.

Eve jerked back the curtain.

"Get out!"

Her face was chalk white, and her blue eyes blazed.

"That was close. That was too damned close," I said, coming into the

room. I wiped my face with my handkerchief.

"I warned you! This finishes it for us, Chad. I mean it. I'm not seeing you alone again. Don't argue. I mean it. Now get out!"

"I'll find a way," I said as I went to the door.

"There is no way." She joined me at the door. "Let me look first."

She opened the door and glanced up and down the corridor.

"It's all right. Now go."

I slipped out of the room like a frightened thief, and went down to the bar.

Something had to be done. I wasn't going to give Eve up, and I wasn't going to give up my right to all that money.

There had to be a way out!

But why go on?

There was no way out. Each day began with a new hope that something would crop up and give me the opportunity of getting Eve to myself for an hour, but by nightfall the opportunity hadn't come.

The days drifted past. I lived in a kind of vacuum, waiting and waiting and waiting for something that never came.

There had to be an end, and finally Vestal decided it was time to go home.

We had been in Venice for three weeks: the longest three weeks I had ever lived through. Not once since I was nearly caught in her room did I have a private word with Eve. I had been badly shaken, and I was too scared to take risks.

We flew back to Los Angeles, and then drove to Little Eden.

Back at Cliffside I had every hope of finding the opportunity that had escaped me in Venice. I would have many hours away from Vestal when I was at the office. I would have to find an apartment where Eve and I could meet.

As we drove up the steep, winding cliff road, with Vestal looking down at the glittering ocean, and Eve sitting motionless in front of me, my mind plotted and planned.

As soon as we had changed, I left Vestal going through a large pile of mail that was awaiting her attention and went into the room she had given me as a study and called Ryan Blakestone. His report was reassuring. Since I had been away, he had made several successful transactions. I arranged to meet him for lunch the following day.

As I hung up, Vestal came in.

"Chad, darling, I've been invited to open the Shelley Lecture Hall at my old school the day after tomorrow. Father left money to build the hall and it's now completed. I want you to come with me."

"For God's sake!" I said. "Those kind of shindigs bore me stiff. You go without, me."

"But I'll be away for three days, Chad," she said, coming to sit on the

arm of my chair. "You wouldn't want me to be away from you all that time?"

My heart skipped a beat, and then began to race madly.

Three days!

Two safe nights with Eve!

Then my mouth turned dry. Suppose Vestal took Eve with her? The chances were that she would.

"Where is your school then?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"San Francisco. I'll fly, of course, but there's a sports meeting the next day and they've asked me to give the prizes."

"I've got work to do," I said, patting her hand. "I'm most certainly not coming. I'm sorry, but that kind of thing isn't my line."

"I suppose not," Vestal said regretfully, "but I would like you to have heard my speech. I'll be taking Eve so I won't be lonely."

I very nearly struck her.

But she didn't take Eve.

At the last moment Eve suddenly went down with sickness and a violent headache.

"At least she might have waited until we got back," Vestal said crossly when she told me. "She's very inconsiderate."

"Take your maid," I said, and I had to make a tremendous effort to hide my feelings. "The girl can't help getting ill."

"I've a good mind not to go," Vestal said irritably. "Oh well, I'll have to take Marianne. She's a fool, but I'll have to put up with her."

She had been working all day on her speech and she had got it on the tape recorder. It is important that I should mention here that Vestal was crazy about tape recorders. She had one in her sitting room and she had given me one for my study.

She made me listen to her speech which was adequate enough, and I was careful to lavish praises on her.

She made three tape recordings before she was satisfied, and she took the machine along with her to the airport so she could play the record back just before she had to open the Lecture Hall.

I went with her to see her off.

"You'll behave yourself, Chad, won't you?" she said suddenly as we walked across the tarmac to the waiting plane. "Don't get into mischief while I'm away."

I forced a laugh.

"Tonight I'm dining with Blakestone. Tomorrow night I am dining with Sternwood. Can't see how I can get into much mischief with those guys."

"I was only joking, darling. Of course, I shouldn't really leave you alone with Eve."

I felt a little chill crawl up my spine.

"Can't say I'm exactly alone with her," I said, trying to sound casual. "There're ten servants and Hargis in the house with us: not entirely alone, Vestal."

"If she wasn't such a dowdy thing I'd be jealous," she said with a brittle little laugh.

I had an idea she was more serious than she made out.

"You're talking nonsense, and I don't like it," I said curtly. "If I were to be unfaithful to you I'd take a damn good care to find someone who doesn't live in the house."

She looked quickly at me; her pinched face alarmed.

"You—you're not going to, are you, Chad?"

"What's the matter with you? Of course not! Now get your mind off this subject. It's not even funny."

Her claw-like hand closed around my wrist.

"You won't ever do that to me, will you, Chad? I couldn't bear it. I—I'd feel so humiliated. I do so want our marriage to be a success."

"Quit talking like this," I said, pretending to be angry. "You have nothing to worry about. Have a good time and hurry home."

Her face brightened.

"You'll miss me then?"

"Sure, and I'll think of you."

It was as much as I could do to look down at her ugly little face and tell these drivelling lies.

"I wish I didn't have to go."

"You'd better get in. They're waiting for you."

She put her skinny arms around my neck and pressed her dry lips against mine.

It was bad enough to have to kiss her in private, but with a couple of dozen people looking on, seeing her ugliness and knowing I couldn't have married her for anything else but her money, it was sheer murder.

She got into the plane at last, and she was waving when it took off.

It would have given me the greatest possible happiness if the plane had suddenly stalled and crashed in flames. That's how much I had grown to loathe her.

There was no sign of Eve when I got back to Cliffside.

I casually asked Hargis where she was.

"She is in bed, I believe, sir," he said, lifting his bushy white eyebrows. "I understand she is unwell."

That jarred me.

I had forgotten she would have to remain in her room for at least this day. Hargis might report to Vestal that as soon as she had gone, Eve had apparently recovered.

I had no idea where Eve's room was in this great palace of a house. I went to my study and checked the house directory. I found her room number and put through a call.

She answered immediately.

"Tonight," I said, keeping my voice down. "At twelve. Will you come to me or shall I come to you?"

"I'll come to you," she said and hung up.

I wiped my sweating hands. I was shaking.

chapter ten

The illuminated hands of the bedside clock stood at ten minutes past two. We had been in this room together since midnight.

"It doesn't seem possible that two hours ago I was ready to walk up a wall," I said. "These past weeks have been hell. We've got to think of a way out of this mess. It mustn't happen again."

"Be happy with what you have had," she said. "There can be no easy way. Even this is dangerous. She might come back. She might walk in at this very moment."

"She won't do that. I've locked the door."

"It's not safe," she repeated.

"Don't worry so much. Now, listen, I've been beating my brains out how to get around this damned problem. I have an idea. You get a day off every week, don't you? Suppose I get an apartment at Eden End? It's within easy reach, and we're not known out there. We could meet when I'm supposed to be in my office, and you're taking your day off."

I felt her stiffen.

"I can't do that, Chad. I have to see my mother on my day off."

"For the love of Mike! Your mother? Does she come before me?"

"Don't talk like that. She knows Vestal. If I suddenly gave up seeing her, she might call Vestal and ask why. My mother and I don't get on too well. She's never trusted me."

"You've got to make some excuse. You must leave that day free for me, Eve."

"I can't," she said sharply. "Besides, it's dangerous. Someone might see us. You never know who might be in Eden End. It's too dangerous."

"Then what are we going to do? Wait another six weeks before we can be alone together again?"

"I warned you, Chad."

"That's no answer. If you want me as badly as I want you...."

"I do, Chad."

The look she gave me set me on fire for her again. I went to her and took her hand.

"I can't face another six weeks of torture. I'm making money now. I've got over thirty thousand dollars salted away. I could buy a partnership with a broker friend of mine. Look, Eve, why not let us come out into the open? I'll make Vestal divorce me and then we can get married."

She stared at me.

"Get married? Chad! Have you gone crazy? What's thirty thousand

dollars? How long would that last? How much do you imagine you could make out of a broker's business? Besides, I've told you: I won't give up this job."

"Why not? What fun can you possibly get out of it?"

"I don't want fun. I live in this lovely house. I get good money. I have a car. I have everything I want and I don't have to work very hard. I would be a fool to give it up."

"Tell me, Eve, why do you make yourself so dowdy? You don't need those glasses, do you? You don't have to wear your hair the way you do?"

She smiled.

"Do you imagine she would tolerate me for a moment if she thought I was prettier than she? That's why she has got rid of so many secretaries. She's jealous of prettiness. The agency who got me the job warned me. Perhaps that will convince you that I'm determined to keep this job. I've had a hard life, Chad. My mother and I get on badly. For years I have had to struggle. I'm not giving up this luxury."

"You're not telling the truth," I said angrily. "You're only hanging on to this job because you imagine Vestal is going to leave you a lot of money. That's it, isn't it?"

She looked away.

"That's my business. I couldn't help falling in love with you, but no matter how much I love you, I'm not going to ruin my own chances."

"She's fooling you. She's only left you a few hundred dollars. She told me so."

Eve touched my hand gently.

"You're the one she's fooling, Chad. I know how much she has left me. I've seen the will."

"When did you see it?"

"A few days ago. She's just made a new one. Her attorney sent her the draft. She left it on her desk. I looked at it."

I was tense now.

"Then how much has she left you?"

"Fifty thousand."

I stared at her.

"She told me only a few hundreds."

"Perhaps she thought you might be jealous. I've seen it in black and white. I'm not giving up that amount of money for anyone."

My heart began to beat more rapidly.

"What has she left me, Eve?"

"Everything: the house, her property and sixty million dollars. The rest of the money goes in legacies and charities."

I drew in a long, slow breath.

"You are sure?"

"Yes. Now do you still want her to divorce you?" There was a jeering expression in her eyes as she fondled my hand. "Do you?"

"It makes a difference." I got up and began to pace up and down. "We may never get it. We may be too old to enjoy it if we do get it."

"There's Providence."

"You mean she may get ill, meet with an accident and die?"

"People do."

Even now while Eve lay on the bed and I paced the room and we talked of Vestal's possible death, it never entered my mind to murder her. It never occurred to me that the easy way out would be to arrange an accident and kill her. The thought just didn't enter my head.

"What a hope," I said. "You and I could grow old, waiting for her to meet with an accident that might never happen."

"What else is there to do?"

"Damn her!" I said. "I wish she would die!"

Then suddenly and without warning the telephone bell began to ring.

It's soft note made both of us start violently.

Eve grabbed up her wrap as if someone had burst into the room.

I stood, motionless, staring at the telephone.

"It's her!" I said in a hoarse whisper. "At twenty past two!"

"Answer it," Eve said. "Be careful what you say."

My hand was shaking as I lifted the receiver. I had enough presence of mind to make my voice sound sleepy.

"What is it?" I growled.

"Oh, Chad!"

It was her! Even when she was three hundred miles away, the bitch still thrust herself between Eve and I.

"Why, Vestal! For goodness sake! It's after two."

"Did I wake you, Chad?"

"You certainly did."

"Don't be cross with me." There was a whimper in her voice. "I'm so lonely without you, darling."

"I guess I miss you too."

I cursed her in my mind, and I looked across at Eve who stood by the door, fastening her wrap. Her face was white in the soft light of the lamp.

"I had to call you, Chad. I've just had a horrible dream. It frightened me so. I dreamed I lost you," the whimpering voice went on. "I dreamed you hated me. There was an expression on your face that terrified me. When I went to you, begging you to be kind to me, you threw me aside and you ran away down a long passage. I went after you, but you went too quickly. You went on and on until I lost sight of

you. I woke up, crying. I was frightened something had happened to you. I had to telephone."

I felt sweat on my face.

"It was only a nightmare," I said, trying to steady my voice. "It's all right, Vestal. There's nothing to worry about."

"It's so good to hear your voice, Chad. I shouldn't have gone away. You do love me still, don't you?"

I gripped the receiver until my fingers turned white.

"Of course I do."

"I love you so, Chad. It's so good to hear your dear voice."

"You must go to sleep now, Vestal. It's late."

"But don't you want to hear about my speech?"

Was she never going to get off that line? The effort I had to make to keep the exasperated fury out of my voice made me tremble.

"Was it a success?"

"It was wonderful."

For the next five minutes she talked solidly. She told me what she had said, how the headmistress had told the school that she had been one of her brightest pupils, how the school had cheered her.

I cut in finally, not caring if she liked it or not.

"That all sounds fine, Vestal, but you'd better hang up now. It's late, and we both want our sleep. Now don't worry anymore."

"All right, Chad. I'm sorry I woke you. I think of you."

"I think of you too. Good night, Vestal."

I put down the receiver.

Somehow that telephone call had ruined the atmosphere in the room.

Whereas, before it had come, the room had been a little dark world shared only by Eve and I, like the cabin of the gondola: a room made for love; a secret place away from everyone, but now it felt as public as a street. I could feel Vestal's presence everywhere.

"I'm going, Chad," Eve said.

"Damn her! She said she dreamed she was losing me."

"I told you she ferreted out secrets."

"I know. Don't go yet. We have another three hours before daylight."

"No. It's no good now. I feel she's here in this room."

"I feel that too." I went over to her and slipped my arms around her, but she broke away.

"No, Chad, no more."

"Then tomorrow night: at the same time. Shall I come to you this time?"

"Poor Chad, how little you know about her. There won't be tomorrow night for us. She'll be back."

"She won't. She has to give the school prizes. She can't come back."

"She'll be back, Chad."

And she did come back.

As I came up the drive after spending the afternoon at the office, I saw the Rolls at the front door.

Vestal was waiting for me on the terrace.

That night of violent passion I had had with Eve hadn't satisfied me.

I tried to tell myself that if Vestal hadn't returned, and Eve and I had been able to have had one more night together, I shouldn't be feeling this body wracking desire for her, but I knew I was kidding myself. I would never have enough of Eve: she was in my blood now as no other woman had ever been before.

Vestal nearly drove me crazy. It was as much as I could do to keep my temper with her, and it was inevitable that she should become aware of the tension between us.

Three days after her unexpected return, she came into my study.

"Chad!"

I dragged my attention from a stock market report I was reading and looked up.

"I'm busy, Vestal. What is it?"

"I'm having a party tomorrow night: only a few old friends. Lieutenant Leggit is coming. You will be there?"

"Oh, sure," I said, not paying much attention to what she was saying. "Be a good girl, and run along now, will you? I have a whale of a lot of work to get through before dinner."

If anyone had told me I could talk to Vestal in this way two months ago, and get away with it, I should have thought he was crazy. But that was how it was. Her love for me had softened her. She was scared to lose me, and she seemed ready to take any kind of treatment from me so long as I stayed with her.

"All right, darling," she said meekly. "I'll go up and change."

When she had gone, I tossed the papers on the desk, lit a cigarette and made myself a highball.

I wondered where Eve was. I hadn't seen her all day. Since that night, I had only caught an occasional glimpse of her, and she was in my mind like a festering wound.

I gulped down the highball, and went into the hall. I still had no idea where her bedroom was, but hoping she might be still in Vestal's study, I went along there.

She was at her desk, busy with Vestal's correspondence. She looked up as I walked in. Her pale face was expressionless as I came over to her.

"She's upstairs changing," I whispered. "I've been thinking of you, Eve. Can't we meet somewhere on Thursday?"

"No!" she said in a fierce undertone. "I've already told you. I have to

see my mother. Will you stop worrying me?"

"Doesn't my love for you mean anything to you?" I said angrily.

She got up, moved around the desk and made for the door.

I grabbed her wrist and swung her around.

"Eve! I can't wait! We must meet again somewhere."

"Keep away from me!"

She wrenched herself free, jerked open the door and went quickly across the hall and up the stairs.

I leaned against the desk, feeling sweat on my face. My heart thumped against my side, blood hammered in my temples.

A soft footfall made me look up.

Hargis was standing in the doorway. His coldly suspicious stare sent a chill up my spine.

"What do you want?" I snarled at him.

"I was about to pull the curtains, sir," he said. "But if I am disturbing you..."

I walked past him and up the stairs.

The house felt full of spies. It was like living in a glass box, with prying eyes on me all the time.

I walked along the corridor towards my dressing room. It was a long corridor with many doors, and I was so occupied with my thoughts, trying to think of a way in which I could get Eve to myself, that I passed my dressing room and went on until I came abruptly to the end of the corridor.

Impatiently I turned to go back, when I noticed, for the first time, a short corridor leading off the one I was in, and which terminated in a cul-de-sac. There was one door down the corridor, and I paused to look at it.

There were thirty guest rooms in this enormous house, but I doubted if this door led into a guest room. It was too isolated from the various bathrooms.

With a sudden feeling of excitement, I wondered if this was Eve's room.

I looked up and down the corridor to make certain no one was watching me, then I walked quietly into the cul-de-sac and paused outside the door and listened.

For a moment or so I heard nothing, then the faint sound of movement told me someone was in the room. As I raised my hand to knock, I heard the tinkle of a telephone bell and the sound of dialling.

I stood still, my head close to the panel of the door, listening.

I heard Eve's voice.

"Is that you, Larry?" she asked. "I'll be along on Thursday. She's giving a party, so I can be late. Yes, it won't be over much before one. I'll meet you at the Atlantic Hotel at seven. Can you manage that?"

There was a long pause, then she said, "I'm counting the hours, Larry. Don't be late, will you, darling?"

There was another pause, then the soft click told me she had hung up.

I don't remember walking back to my dressing room.

I found myself sitting on the bed with my face in my hands, shaking and cold.

If her love for me had made Vestal soft and vulnerable, my obsession for Eve had made me far more so.

I felt as if someone had bludgeoned me with a hammer.

As the last few inches of the tape ran off the spool and slid, snakelike, through the recording head of the take-up spool, Chad switched off the recorder.

He glanced at his wristwatch. He had been talking non-stop now for an hour. He pushed back his chair and stood up, stretching his arms above his head.

The afternoon sun was fiercer now, and the heat inside the wooden beach hut was intense.

He wiped his face and hands, then poured an inch or so of whisky into his glass, added charge water and drank.

As he set down the glass, he looked over his shoulder at the dead woman on the divan bed.

A bluebottle fly was walking slowly up her long, shapely leg. It paused on her knee, buzzed excitedly, then flew off to circle the room.

Chad lit a cigarette and tossed the match into the ashtray that was laden with cigarette butts.

Unable to resist the morbid temptation, he crossed the room and touched her hand. He kept his eyes averted from her face.

Her hand felt cool, but there was no sign yet of rigor mortis, but that wasn't to be expected so soon in this heat, he thought, and grimacing, he crossed the room to look out of the window.

He had a clear view across the sands to the distant Eden End, some nine miles away. The Eden End road stretched in a straight ribbon to the beach.

He had no fear that Larry would come on him unexpectedly, but he would have to watch the road from now on. Although he was confident Larry wouldn't get here for another hour, he knew he couldn't afford to be surprised.

He fingered the heavy wrench on the table. He picked it up and balanced it in his hand. It was a good weapon. He swung it, nodded his head, satisfied, and put the wrench down on the table.

He moved the table closer to the window and arranged his chair so that he could watch the road while he dictated the last part of his story.

He threaded another tape on to the machine, took another gulp of whisky, turned the starting switch, and as the spools began to revolve, he began to talk again.

chapter eleven

Thinking about the setup now, I find it distinctly funny, although, of course, at the time, I didn't think so.

Vestal was madly in love with me and terrified she was going to lose me. I was madly in love with Eve, and now I was terrified I was going to lose her.

Yes, it was funny. I was making Vestal suffer, and Eve was making me suffer.

But I had more guts than Vestal. When I got over the first shock of finding out that Eve was cheating me, I became viciously angry. I had no intentions of begging Eve not to give me up. I was determined to find out who this man was, how long this affair had been going on or if it were something that hadn't yet become an affair. I was determined to stop it, and get Eve back by force if necessary.

She was to meet this Larry at the Atlantic Hotel at seven o'clock on Thursday. Her story that she had to be with her mother was obviously a lie. If she could make a date with Larry, she could have made one with me.

I made up my mind I would be at the hotel when they met. What I did after that remained to be seen. First, I wanted to look at this man who made Eve count the hours until they met.

On Thursday morning, I told Vestal I might be a little late back from the office, but I would be in good time for the party. At twenty past six, I called her from the office.

"Vestal, I'm sorry, but I can't make the party until much later."

"Oh Chad! Why not?"

"A guy I knew in my army days has just blown into town. I haven't seen him in years. We have a lot to say to each other. You can get on all right without me."

"But, Chad, bring him to the party. You—you can't leave me to..."

"Of course you can manage. This guy wouldn't fit in. He was a top sergeant, and he's a rough tough. You wouldn't want him among your friends. I'll see you around eleven. If I can get rid of him before then, I'll be back earlier. So long for now," and I hurriedly hung up as she began to protest.

I had taken her Rolls to the office as my Cadillac was receiving attention from Joe.

The Atlantic Hotel was out at Eden End, some twelve miles from Little Eden, and I had to have transport.

Eden End was a playground for tourists. It was a jumble of auto-camps, beach huts and this one hotel.

The hotel was a typical love nest. All kinds of couples stayed there, and no awkward questions were asked. So long as you paid in advance you could have a room, with or without luggage, with or without marriage lines, for an hour or for a year: the management wasn't fussy.

I had been there myself from time to time with Glorie, and I knew the setup pretty well.

I left the Rolls in a parking lot a few hundred yards from the hotel, and walked along the beach to the hotel entrance.

The big garden was crowded with visitors, sitting at tables, shaded by gay umbrellas.

I took a table in the shade of a tree, on the fringe of the crowd and looked around for Eve. It took time to spot her.

I scarcely recognized her. She had looked beautiful and desirable at San Marco when I had seen her for the first time without her glasses and stripped of her dowdiness, but she looked far more beautiful and desirable now. She had on a light blue wool sweater and a white skirt.

The way that sweater showed off her shape turned my mouth dry.

I looked with rising fury at the man sitting with her. He was about my build; big, powerful and broad shouldered. He was fair and younger than I was, and better looking. He had on a worn sports jacket and baggy whipcord brown trousers. He didn't look as if he had any money to spare, and that discovery gave me sudden hope.

I watched them for maybe an hour.

Eve talked animatedly, but her companion seemed depressed. He slouched in his chair, and from time to time I saw he was stifling a yawn.

It suddenly occurred to me that he was bored, and it also occurred to me that I must look the way he was looking when I had Vestal in my hair.

The more I watched him, the more convinced I became that he was bored with Eve. Every now and then, he would glance at his wristwatch when she wasn't looking. I noticed too that Eve was having a struggle to keep the conversation going, and I felt a sudden vicious pleasure in watching them.

Around eight-fifteen, they got up. I saw Eve slip a five-dollar bill under her glass to take care of the check.

Larry, if that was his name, didn't appear to see her do it, but he made no attempt to call the waiter and settle the check himself.

They walked towards the hotel. I went after them. As they walked up the steps to the restaurant, Eve slipped her arm through his, but after they had taken a few steps, his arm dropped, and he moved away from her.

I didn't go into the restaurant. I sat on the balcony and watched

them through the casement windows.

Before the meal was over Eve had given up the unequal struggle, and they finished the meal in silence.

I could see he was becoming more and more bored, while into her pale, lovely face came a drawn, miserable expression I had seen so often on Vestal's face.

Thinking about it now, it certainly was funny: Vestal was miserable about me; I was miserable about Eve, and Eve was miserable about Larry. Yes, it was funny all right.

When they had finished the meal, I saw Eve slip a couple of bills into Larry's hand, and I watched him settle the check with the money she had given him.

They came out on to the balcony, but not before I had ducked out of sight.

"Shall we go down on the beach?" Eve asked as they paused at the top of the steps leading into the garden.

He shook his head.

"Sorry, but I've got to get back now. There's a guy I have to meet."

So I wasn't the only one who had a convenient guy to meet.

I saw Eve's face suddenly harden.

"You're lying, Larry! You know very well..."

"Okay, okay," he broke in, his voice exasperated. "So I'm lying. Maybe I haven't got a guy to meet, but I have things to do. For the love of Mike, quit acting like a lovesick kid and go home. I'll see you next Thursday if I can get away."

"But, Larry, I don't have to get back until late," she said, suddenly pleading. "I told you. Don't go now. Let's go down to the beach."

"What the hell for? I'm not in the mood for beach work tonight. Let's skip it for God's sake. I tell you I have things to do."

He walked down the steps leaving her on the balcony, her face tight with misery. She started after him, then stopped, and with a despairing shrug of her shoulders, she went over to the basket chair I had been sitting in, and sank into it.

We both watched Larry walk through the gardens towards the hotel car park. He got into a battered, dusty Ford coupe, and drove away, heading for Little Eden.

Eve sat motionless, watching him until he was out of sight. I came out from behind the palm trees and sat down in a chair close to her.

She was so preoccupied with watching Larry drive away that she didn't notice me.

I lit a cigarette and waited.

After a while she became aware that someone was near her, and she looked up sharply.

Our eyes met.

"Hallo, Eve," I said, and smiled at her.

She flinched. Fear, surprise and anger jumped into her eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

"Spying on you. Your mother's a pretty well setup guy, isn't she?"

Her fists clenched.

"Does Mrs. Winters know where you are?" she said fiercely. "Why have you left the party?"

"I had a guy to meet, Eve."

Again she flinched.

"When a man gets bored with a woman, there's always a guy to meet," I went on, staring at her.

Her hands turned into fists, but she didn't say anything.

"Who is he, Eve?"

She looked at me, hesitated, then with a sudden shrug, she said, "My husband—satisfied?"

I felt a little spasm in my guts. I wasn't expecting to hear that, and it knocked me.

"You've kept him secret, haven't you? Do you love him, Eve?"

She stared at me, her eyes stony.

"I used to."

"So that's why you don't want to lose your luxurious job. I bet that guy comes expensive."

She flinched.

"Don't let's talk about him."

"I want to. He looked pretty bored. Other women, Eve?"

"Hundreds of other women," she said bitterly. "You don't know what it means to have loved someone and watched that love fall to pieces. Larry means nothing to me now. He's just a rotten habit. If he suddenly fell in love with me again, I'd be able to walk out on him." She paused, then went on in a tight, strangled voice, "It is being dropped, put on the shelf for some other woman, knowing every minute he spends with me is boring him to death that makes me see him every Thursday. I keep hoping he'll change. There was a time when he begged for my love. Perhaps one day, he'll beg for it again. Then I'll tell him to go home, and I'll be rid of him forever."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it? It makes sense to me. No man has ever picked me up and dropped me. Larry's the first. It hurt my pride. One of these days I want to be in the position to walk out on him, and have him run after me, begging me to come back."

We sat silent for several minutes. Then I got to my feet.

"Come on. We're going down to the beach."

She stiffened.

"We're not!"

My hand closed around her wrist.

"You wanted to go down there. I heard you ask him. That's where we are going."

She tried to pull away, but I tightened my grip.

"I don't give a damn if we make a scene up here," I went on, looking at her. "Are you coming or am I going to drag you down there?"

"Let me go!"

"I mean it, Eve."

She stared up at me, her face white, her eyes angry. We looked at each other, and she saw I did mean it.

"I don't want to, Chad; not now."

"You did five minutes ago. Come on."

She got up, and we walked down the terrace steps, across the garden and down to the beach.

The road out of Eden End was as straight as a foot rule and bordered either side by sand dunes. I turned on the headlamps and shoved the gas pedal to the boards. The speedometer needle flicked upwards, and hung around seventy-five as the big car surged effortlessly and silently along the road.

It was when I was in sight of the lights of Little Eden that the thing happened that was to change my life, has taken away my future, and is responsible for me sitting here in this stifling beach hut, recording a confession of murder.

Without warning, the front offside tire burst.

I heard the bang, and felt the car lurch violently to the left.

I was going at over seventy miles an hour. The car heaved itself off the road while I wrestled madly with the steering wheel. I had stamped down on the brake and that action saved the car from turning over.

It ploughed through the sand, and lurched horribly. The offside wheels lifted, hovered, then slammed back and the car stopped.

I sat for a moment recovering from the shock. Then I got out of the car, swearing, and looking for damage.

Apart from the burst tire, nothing seemed bent or broken or even scratched. Luckily the sand at this spot wasn't too soft, and I didn't have much trouble in backing the car on to the road again.

I stripped off my coat and got down to the job of changing the wheel.

While I worked, I thought what a lucky escape I had had. If the blowout had happened while I was driving up the cliff road with its hairpin bends, and its nine hundred foot drop on to rocks I should be dead by now. I couldn't have found a more convenient place for a blowout. The sand had taken up the shock, and the car wasn't even damaged.

I was tightening the wheel bolts when the idea dropped into my mind.

Thinking about it now, I am sure the seed of murder had been in my mind ever since I heard about Vestal's will.

The tire blowout germinated the seed.

I suddenly saw the complete solution to my problems: money, Eve, my freedom and my future. It was as if a picture had been flashed on the screen of my mind—as clear as that.

If she died...

That thought had already occurred to me.

Well, I could kill her, couldn't I?

I came up the steps to the terrace as the lounge clock struck half past midnight. The lights were on in the lounge, but before I could reach the casement windows, Vestal came out.

"So you're back?"

Her voice was strident and hard, and she looked pale in the shadowy moonlight.

"If it's not me, it must be my ghost," I said, shoving my chin at her.

I wasn't in the mood to take anything from her this night.

After I had changed the wheel I had put the burst tire into the boot and locked the boot. During the rest of the journey back to Cliffside, my mind had been busy.

My murder plan was nearly complete by the time I had garaged the Rolls and had walked up the steps to the terrace.

I felt impersonal about it. What puzzled me was why I hadn't thought of murdering Vestal before.

Seeing her in the casement doorway, hearing her strident voice, killed any shrinking feeling I might have had of ridding myself of her.

"You've been with some woman!" she said furiously. "Don't you dare lie to me! Who is she?"

"Top Sergeant Jim Lasher," I said, grinning at her. "He may sing soprano, but at least he has hair on his chest."

Her hand flashed up and caught me on the side of my face, a hard, stinging slap that made my eyes water.

Women don't do that to me and get away with it.

I felt a vicious surge of fury run through me, and I grabbed her; my fingers dug into her skinny shoulders.

I had a sudden impulse to shift my grip to her throat, but luckily for me I didn't do it.

Two hands that felt like steel grips closed around my wrists and broke my hold. I was shoved back as violently as if I had walked into an advancing bulldozer.

"Take it easy, Mr. Winters," Police Lieutenant Leggit said quietly.

Instinctively I set myself to throw a punch at him, but his voice

suddenly barked, "I shouldn't do that!" And that bark brought my hands down.

I shrugged my coat into place and fumbled for a cigarette. I was shaking with rage, but somehow I kept hold of myself. This was dangerous. I wouldn't have touched the little bitch if I'd known Leggit was on hand.

Vestal had vanished. That left Leggit and me on the terrace.

He offered me a light, and in the light of the flame we looked at each other.

"Women can be hell," he said easily. "Sometimes I feel like strangling my own wife, but it's not the best thing to do."

"I guess that's right," I said, and I was startled to hear how shaky my voice sounded.

"Well, maybe I'll go home now. Mrs. Winters was uneasy about you so I stuck around." He turned and walked into the lounge, I followed him.

"Would you mind ringing for my hat, Mr. Winters?" he went on, and I felt his eyes going over me searchingly I crossed over to the bell and rang it.

"The trouble with my wife," I said, trying to force a grin, "is she's a little possessive. I had a date with an old army friend of mine, and for some reason or other she seems to think I was out with a woman."

He nodded.

"Yeah. Women do get odd notions."

I began to relax.

This guy seemed to be a bigger sucker than I had imagined him to be.

"Oh well, we'll patch it up," I said. "She'll get over it. I didn't bring this guy to the party because he's a bit rough."

Hargis came in with Leggit's hat. He handed it to him and after giving me a quick, cold stare, went away.

"Well, good night, Mr. Winters," Leggit said, offering his hand.

I shook hands with him.

"I'd get rid of that lipstick you have on your collar," he went on. "Mrs. Winters may have eyes as sharp as mine."

He went out, leaving me standing rigid, my heart hammering.

chapter twelve

The big grandfather's clock in the hall was striking three when I cautiously opened my bedroom door and stepped into the dimly lit passage.

I stood for some moments, listening. No sound came to me except the steady ticking of my wristwatch and the deeper, slower tick of the clock in the hall.

I shut my door and locked it, taking the key. Then I walked silently along the passage and paused outside Vestal's door. I listened with my ear against the door panel. I heard nothing.

I went on to the end of the passage, then before turning down the cul-de-sac that led to Eve's room, I looked over my shoulder to satisfy myself no one was watching me.

I paused outside Eve's door, turned the handle and pushed gently. The door swung inwards.

I stepped into the moonlit room, closed the door and turned the key.

"Who's there?" Eve asked sharply.

I could just make out her outline as she sat up in bed.

"Keep your voice down," I said, "and don't turn on the light."

"What do you want? What are you doing here?"

I could tell how alarmed she was by the tone of her voice.

"She accused me of going out with a woman, and we had a scene."

"She doesn't know who?"

"No."

"Then what are you doing here? Go away! Leave me alone!"

"Keep your voice down. I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to listen. Please go! Look what happened the last time you came to my room. Please go at once!"

"Never mind what happened last time. This is important. How would you like to earn fifty thousand dollars, Eve?"

"What are you talking about? You must go, Chad!"

"Listen to what I'm saying. I'm offering you the chance of collecting fifty thousand dollars. I'm also offering you myself as a husband with the right to share sixty million dollars. What do you say to that?"

There was a long pause as she peered at me, trying to see my expression in the half darkness.

"Are you drunk? What are you saying?"

"You remember the other night you talked about Providence, and I asked you if you meant Vestal might get ill, meet with an accident and die? You said people do. Remember?"

Her fingers dug into the sheet that covered her.

"Chad! What are you saying?"

"Vestal is going to meet with an accident."

"How do you know? Oh, please stop talking nonsense and go away. She might come in any moment!"

I leaned forward and whispered, "I'm not going to wait for Providence, Eve. I'm going to kill her."

I heard her catch her breath sharply.

I waited as I had waited for Vestal's reaction when I had suggested the tax fraud. I had an idea that I could count on Eve, but I wasn't sure. If she shied away from the suggestion, I was sunk, and my mouth was dry as I waited to see what she would say.

She remained motionless for what seemed a never-ending time. Her hands clutched the sheet; her eyes, glittering in the moonlight, stared straight at me. I could hear the heavy thud of her heart.

"Kill her?" she whispered. "But how will you do it, Chad?"

There it was: the exact thing I was hoping she would say. I knew then I could go ahead, for without her, my plan wouldn't work.

I searched in my dressing gown pocket for a pack of cigarettes, offered her one, but she shook her head. I lit up, and for a brief moment we stared at each other in the flame of the lighter.

She was as white as a fresh fall of snow, and her eyes looked like dark holes in her face.

"How will you do it?" she repeated.

"Never mind for the moment how I'll do it. If I do do it, will you marry me, Eve?"

"Marry you? But how can I? I'm married to Larry."

"We can take care of him. He'll give you a divorce. With sixty million dollars to play with you can take care of anyone. Now listen, I'm not doing it unless you give me your word we'll marry within nine months of you getting a divorce. While we are waiting for the divorce, we'll go to Europe, and we'll live as man and wife. The moment she's dead, Eve, I'm not losing sight of you. I don't know how you feel about me, but I know how I feel about you. You're the only woman I have ever loved. You're in my blood. I'm not going to ask you if you love me, but I know you and I could be happy together. Will you marry me after she's dead?"

"If you want me to, I will."

A little too quick: a little too glib. Although I was crazy about her, I didn't trust her. I was sure she was still in love with Larry. I wasn't going to risk my neck, and then finish up with a double cross.

"Listen carefully, Eve. We won't only share the money, we'll also share in Vestal's death. It'll be murder. You will have to play as big a part in it as I. If you change your mind after she's dead about

marrying me, I'll give myself up to the police. I promise you that. If I do that, you'll be caught too. So don't make a snap decision. If you like I'll come back tomorrow night to give you time to think about it. Would you like me to do that?"

She caught hold of my wrist.

"No. I'll give you my answer now. If you want me, I'll marry you, Chad. I'll be glad to—only—only it's got to be safe."

I slid my arms round her. The feel of her body under the thin stuff of her nightdress set me on fire, but this wasn't the time for love. Love would come later: nights of love. With a little patience, and a lot of nerve Eve would be mine for the rest of my days.

"Murder's never safe, but I have a plan that could be safe if I can rely on you. When I came in tonight, she accused me of going out with a woman. I kidded her, and she smacked my face. I lost my head and got hold of her. I wanted to wring her neck. It was lucky I didn't. That police Lieutenant was in the lounge. He came out and parted us. He made a crack about strangling his wife, but it was just eyewash. As he was going he made another crack about me having lipstick on my collar. The point is this: he knows Vestal and I have had a quarrel. When he hears she has met with an accident, he's going to jump to the conclusion that I've murdered her. I'm a natural for her murder. I don't love her. We've just quarrelled. I get all her money. I have everything to gain by her death. Okay, maybe it isn't a bad thing for him to think I did it, because after I've shown him I couldn't possibly have done it, he might begin to think it really was an accident, and if he does that, we're safe."

Eve clutched hold of my hands.

"I don't understand," she said, her voice unsteady. "It frightens me, Chad. How exactly will you do it?"

"Do you know what happens if your front tire bursts? If it's your left wheel, the car slews to the left; your right wheel, it goes to the right. It happened to me as I was driving from Eden End. I finished up among the sand dunes. It'll happen to Vestal when she's driving down the cliff road; but there's no sand dunes to break her fall."

Eve's grip tightened on my hands. She didn't say anything.

"I took her car when I went out to Eden End. In the boot is the burst tire. This is what I do; one of these nights she'll be going out. We'll have to take care of Joe. The stuff you gave her that made her ill; we'll give him some of that. She doesn't mind driving herself, only we'll have to be sure Joe is out of the way. When she goes down to the garage to get the car I'll be waiting for her. I'll hit her over the head, then I'll drive her to the top of the cliff road. I'll take the offside wheel off and put on the wheel with the burst tire. I'll put her in the driving seat and steer the car over the cliff. It's easy, but the refinements are

difficult. As soon as Leggit hears what has happened, he'll think of me. I've got to have a cast-iron alibi; an alibi that's unbreakable, and that's where you come in. I have got it all doped out, and if you do what I tell you, we can't go wrong."

"What do I do?"

"The setup is this: I've got to be in two places at once. I've got to be on the cliff road and I've got to be in my study with you. We've got to have witnesses who will swear they saw and heard me in the study while in actual fact I shall be on the cliff road fixing the tire and sending the car over the cliff. They've got to be witnesses Leggit will believe. One of them must be Hargis. Leggit will find out fast enough that Hargis hates me, and if Hargis says I was in my study at the time of the accident, Leggit will believe him. The other witness will be Ryan Blakestone. He's respectable, and Leggit will know he's not the type to stick his neck into trouble by lying to the police."

"But how can you be in two places at once?" Eve said. "It sounds all right, but how do you do it?"

"It'll take patience, care and practice but it can be done. I'll tell you what appears to happen: Vestal leaves the house say at nine o'clock. At nine-ten, you will ring for Hargis. When he comes to the lounge, you will come out of my study and leave the door wide open. He'll hear me dictating a letter on the tape recorder. He will see the back of my armchair, and part of my arm and elbow on the armrest. That's all he'll need to see to convince him I'm in the room. He'll imagine he has seen my head and feet: imagination fills in a lot of gaps. You'll tell him I want coffee. You will remind him Blakestone will be arriving in a few minutes, and when he does arrive, he is to show him into the lounge, but not into the study as I'll be tied up for half an hour. You'll go back to the study, leaving the door open. When Hargis brings the coffee, let him come into the study, but keep between him and my chair. Motion to him to put the coffee on the side table by the door, and sign to him to keep quiet. My voice will be dictating all the time remember. When he has gone, you shut the door and wait for Blakestone to arrive. He'll be along in about a quarter of an hour. When Hargis shows him into the lounge, come out at once and leave the study door open so both of them can see me in the chair. Tell Blakestone I am just finishing dictating,, and I won't keep him more than ten minutes. Then go back to the study and shut the door. That's all there is to it— think you can do it?"

"You said that is what appears to happen—what does happen?"

"I'll prepare a tape record. I'll dictate a number of letters and you'll play the tape back so Hargis and Blakestone will hear my voice. My arm on the chair arm will be easy enough. A coat and a wire frame will take care 'of that. We'll use the wing chair and turn it so its back

is to the door. The voice, the arm and we can fix up a smouldering cigarette will be enough to convince anyone I'm in the room. While you are taking care of this end, I'll be on the cliff road changing the wheel. When I've done the job, I'll come straight back, get through the study window, put on the coat that they've seen and come to the study door. I'll apologize to Blakestone for keeping him waiting. So long as you don't lose your nerve and follow out what I'm telling you, this alibi is unbreakable. Now go ahead and pick holes in it." She leaned against me, and I could feel she was trembling slightly.

"Suppose Blakestone's late and the tape record runs out?" she asked.

I nodded.

"That's a good point. You have an hour's running time on the recorder. As soon as Hargis has brought the coffee and gone, turn off the recorder and wait until Blakestone comes, then start the machine again as soon as you hear him enter the room. You'll have tape enough. There is one tricky bit that is essential to the success of this plan. It'll need a lot of practice and you've got to time it dead right. When you come out to tell Blakestone I won't be long, I'll join in. I'll say 'Sorry, Ryan, shan't be long now, or something like that. Then I'll appear to go on dictating. That will convince him faster than anything that I'm in the room, but the timing will be tricky. I'll have to record that speech and you will have to fix it that it fits in absolutely at the right time."

"Sounds too difficult, Chad."

"It's got to be done."

"We can't tell until we try it. There's one thing you haven't thought of. You can hear the car leave the garage from the house. If she leaves at nine o'clock and Blakestone doesn't arrive until nine-thirty, suppose Hargis wonders why she hasn't gone? Suppose he goes to see if she is having trouble starting the car?"

"You're using your head," I said. "That's just the kind of point I want raised. We could slip up on a thing like that." I stubbed out my cigarette and lit another. "As soon as I've knocked her out, I'll put her in the car and drive to the head of the cliff road. I'll stop there in that clump of trees and wait for Blakestone to pass. As soon as he's gone, I'll go on to the first dangerous bend."

"No, wait, Chad, that won't do. He might notice the fencing is intact. You're trying to make him believe she's already had her accident."

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head and frowned. "Goddam it! That's something I had overlooked! We'll have to shorten the time, Eve. We'll have to get Blakestone up here earlier. Now listen, this is the way I'll work it. As soon as I see his lights coming, I'll get Vestal on my lap, her hands on the steering wheel. I'll drive down to meet him, keeping out of sight behind her. I'll be going fast, and knowing him,

he'll be going fast too. He'll see the Rolls, and he might catch a glimpse of Vestal, but he won't see me. I'll keep well down behind her. When he hears the news, he'll assume the accident happened a few seconds after he had passed her."

"The timing is going to be difficult, Chad. If he's early..."

"He never is; he's usually late, but I'll impress on him to be on time when I ask him up."

"If you do it halfway down the road, Chad, how will you get back in time? You can't walk three miles. It's too far."

"That's right again. In the afternoon, you must take your car and hide it in the woods. Leave it there for me to use when I'm through."

"I'll do it."

I looked at my watch. It was now nearly four o'clock.

"Think about it, Eve. We have time. Work on it. Think of all the likely snags. We can't afford to make a mistake."

"I'll think about it."

"Let me know when she is going out in the evening. It's got to be after dark. We've got to have warning, and we've got to be ready."

"I'll let you know."

I stood up.

"Then it's on?"

"Yes."

"Scared?"

"A little."

"It can't go wrong if you keep your head. You've got the tricky end to handle."

"Your end's tricky too."

"Don't worry about me. I'll handle my end all right." I bent and kissed her. "We're in this together, Eve. This is the beginning of our partnership."

Her arms went around my neck.

"Yes, Chad."

"And you'll marry me?"

"I've said I would."

"It's damn funny, but I want you more than her money."

"You'll have both."

I touched her face lightly, then crossed the room and unlocked the door.

And that's how we planned it. At the time it didn't seem coldblooded to either of us. We just didn't think about Vestal. She was something in the way; something to be removed. The prize was too big to have qualms—the qualms came later.

I slept late and I slept dreamlessly.

While I was taking a shower, it crossed my mind that I had to make

up with Vestal. If she really began to believe that I had been unfaithful to her, she might, in a fit of spite, alter her will I got in a mild panic just to think of such a possibility.

She had gone to her room apparently convinced I had been out with a woman. The difficulty now would be to convince her she had been mistaken. Unless I produced the fictitious Top-Sergeant Jim Lasher, I couldn't imagine any way of convincing her.

But by the time I had dressed and had had breakfast on my balcony, I had found a way to handle the situation, I put a call through to Vestal's room "What is it?"

Her voice sounded strident and harsh.

"This is Chad, Vestal. May I talk to you?"

"No! I don't want anything more to do with you!"

"I want to say how ashamed I am, and I've a confession to make to you."

I was hoping that line might prick her curiosity, and it did.

"What confession?" she said sharply.

"I can't blurt it out over the telephone. Can I come to your room?"

I made my voice sound pretty humble, and I was glad she couldn't see my expression. I had trouble not to burst out laughing when she said in her grand manner, "Very well. You may come in half an hour's time."

The silly little dope! I thought as I hung up. Well, she could throw her weight about a little longer, but her sands were running out.

Exactly at eleven-thirty, I tapped on her door.

She was sitting before her dressing table in a yellow wrap, pretending to do her hair.

I came over to her and stood uneasily before her.

"I'm sorry, Vestal, and I hope you will try to forgive me," I said, launching into a speech I had rehearsed after breakfast. "I want to tell you the truth: I was out with a woman last night, and I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself."

I knew that was the last thing she wanted to hear. I could see by the way her face blanched, what a devastating blow this was to her. She was prepared to suspect I had been out with a woman, but for me to admit it, hit her where she lived.

"Oh, Chad!"

She forgot to be angry; forgot to be jealous. All she could think of now was that she might lose me.

"I'm sorry, Vestal, but I promise it won't happen again. Jim and I got drunk. He wanted to go to a brothel, and he persuaded me to go too."

"A brothel?"

I saw dazed relief come into her face, as I knew it would come.

"Yes. I don't know if you can ever forgive me for being so depraved,

but I was drunk.”

"Oh, Chad! You frightened me. I thought you had fallen in love with some woman. Oh, Chad!"

She started to cry. I took her in my arms. She sobbed on my shoulder, hugging me, pressing her pinched ugly face against mine, running her claw-like fingers through my hair.

"Oh Chad, darling, of course I forgive you. I'm sorry I was suspicious of you. You must forgive me too."

It was as easy and as simple as that.

chapter thirteen

Four days later I was sitting in my study, glancing through the morning newspaper before I left for the office, when Eve came in with the mail.

Her face was impersonal as she put the letters on the desk in front of me.

She tapped the pile of letters with a slim finger, gave me a significant look and went out, closing the door behind her.

I picked up the letters and shuffled through them. Among them I found a slip of paper on which was typed:

She has just made a date with Mrs. Hennessey. Friday, 28th. 9.30 p.m. to meet Stowenski, the violinist.

My heart did a somersault.

Mrs. Hennessey was Vestal's best friend; a fat hen of a woman who never stopped talking, and who never succeeded in saying anything worth listening to. Even Vestal picked her to pieces when she wasn't with her, but she hung on to her because Mrs. Hennessey knew all the local gossip: dope that Vestal couldn't resist.

Vestal had been yammering about Stowenski for the past week. To my thinking he was just another longhaired fake, but he had certainly stood Little Eden's society up on its ear by a series of concerts, and now he was doing the social round. Apparently Mrs. Hennessey had grabbed him before Vestal could sink her claws into him.

I had now three clear days!

Just for a moment I felt a chill crawl up my spine. So long as the idea had been only an idea I had accepted it without a qualm. Now I realized it was about to turn into a fact, for the first time, I began to feel scared.

One slip and I was finished.

I lit a cigarette with Eve's note and powdered the ash. Then I put the rest of my mail in my pocket and walked down the steps to where my car was waiting.

Eve passed me on her way to the greenhouses.

"Thursday, two o'clock at the beach hut," I said under my breath as she passed.

She gave a little nod to tell me she had heard and understood.

The difficulties were great.

There was now no question of night rehearsals. I was once more sleeping with Vestal.

We would have to perfect the plan in the afternoon and part of the evening of Eve's day off.

At the office, I set about dictating a number of letters I had drafted on to the tape recorder. After each letter I wrote down the time shown by the indicating needle on the machine, numbering the letters against the time so that Eve should know exactly when my important words to Blakestone were arriving.

I was afraid to play back the record in case Miss Goodchild surprised me, but I had an idea the result would be what I wanted.

I had a feeling of urgency. We were cutting corners and working under difficulties, and the risks were great, but that didn't stop me. I was launched on this plan now, and I wasn't turning back.

Vestal had told me that Mrs. Hennessey had invited her over to her house to meet Stowenski. She wanted me to go with her, but I told her I was having Blakestone over for a drink and to discuss business. I don't think she expected me to go with her, and so long as she was sure I wasn't going to run off with some woman, she was quite happy for me to remain at home.

I went to the office on Thursday morning, and before leaving for lunch, I called Ryan Blakestone.

"Will you come out to Cliffside tomorrow night, Ryan?" I said. "I have some business to talk over with you, and I thought you'd like to see the house."

"I'll be there."

"I want to surprise Vestal, so don't be early. If she thought you and I were hatching something, she'd stick around until I told her what it was. Be at the house sharp at nine-fifteen."

"Okay."

I hung up and rang for Miss Goodchild.

"I won't be back after lunch," I told her. "I feel like a round of golf."

There were six golf courses in Little Eden, and I felt fairly safe, saying I was going to spend the afternoon playing a round. If Vestal called and wanted to know where I was, she'd be unlikely to check all six courses.

After lunch I drove down to the beach.

Vestal's beach hut was isolated: there was no other hut within three miles of it. She very rarely went there now, preferring to swim in the pool on the estate. There was plenty of cover around the hut where I could conceal my car.

I unlocked the hut and opened the windows.

Five minutes later Eve drove up. I watched her park her car out of sight, then come across the sand to the hut.

I had the tape recorder on the table just as I have it here now.

It's a funny thing, but I had no desire to take her in my arms as she came into the hut. We looked at each other. Her eyes were glittering behind her glasses, and her face was pale.

"We'd better get to work, Eve. We haven't much time."

She laid on the table a long tube made of wire.

"I don't know if this will do for your arm. I did it last night."

"Good girl. I haven't had a chance to try myself."

I took off my coat and fitted the tube into one of the sleeves. With a little manipulation I bent and adjusted the tube inside the sleeve, then arranged it on the arm of one of the chairs in the hut.

We both went around the back of the chair to inspect the effect. It looked exactly what I intended it to be: a man's arm resting naturally on the arms of the chair.

"That's it," I said. "If we fix a piece of wire with a small loop to it on to the sleeve, it'll hold a burning cigarette just out of sight. Hargis and Blakestone will see the smoke above the chair and the illusion will be complete."

"Have you dictated the letters, Chad?"

"I'll play them back. Let's set the stage first. Bring the table over in front of the chair."

We arranged the table the way I wanted it, shifted the chair around a little more, then I turned on the tape recorder and we both went to the hut door and looked across the room at the back of the chair.

I had to adjust the recorder to get the volume right, then I rejoined Eve by the door to listen to the complete record.

The effect was uncanny.

The arm on the chair, the smoke of the cigarette drifting up to the ceiling and the voice talking gave a convincing impression that there was a third person in the hut.

Halfway through the tape my voice suddenly stopped dictating. There was a slight pause, then in a slightly louder tone, my voice said, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Ryan. I'm nearly through now."

We looked at each other. Eve was white and shaking. She put her hand on my arm. I tried to force a grin, but the grin wouldn't come. We stood side by side, listening to the end of the tape.

"It works," I said as I went over to the recorder to turn it off. "It can't go wrong, Eve, so long as you handle it right. We'll play it over until you've got it by heart." I took from my pocket the copies of all the letters I had dictated. "You must be able to judge exactly when those words of mine to Blakestone are coming. That is the key to the whole setup. Slip up on that, and we're sunk."

We settled down to work.

After a couple of hours, she had the recording by heart.

"Okay, now let's have a rehearsal," I said. "This chair is the study door.

You handle the recorder. I'll be Hargis."

We rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed.

It wasn't until long past dusk that I was satisfied. My idea worked.

There was no question about it. Given the right lighting and the proper setting, I was positive both Hargis and Blakestone would be willing to swear I hadn't left the study.

The only weakness lay in Eve. If she lost her nerve we were sunk. If she got flustered, mistimed her cue or made Hargis or Blakestone suspicious by her manner, then the whole alibi would fall to the ground.

I took hold of her and held her close to me.

"Think you have the nerve to go through with this, Eve?"

She leaned against me. She looked white and exhausted.

"Yes."

"Our lives are in your hands. You realize that?"

She nodded, and I could feel she was beginning to tremble.

"You still want to go ahead? There's time to pull back. Tomorrow is still a long way from us."

"No. We'll do it."

"Okay. I've got to get back. She's playing bridge, but I want to be back before she does. Will you go through the thing on your own?"

"Not now. I—I don't want to be alone here, Chad. I'll do it again in my room. I don't want to be left here alone."

"Okay. Come on; let's get moving."

The following day, Friday 28th of September, I got back from the office soon after five o'clock.

Vestal was out somewhere. I had time to conceal in my desk drawer a pair of overalls I had taken from the garage. Changing a wheel could be a dirty job, and I had to look immaculate when Blakestone arrived.

Then I went up to my room and called Eve's room.

"Yes?"

"I'm back. Where is she?"

"She's gone to a movie. She'll be back at six."

"I'm coming along to your room."

"You'd better not."

"I've got to."

I hung up, went to my door and made sure the corridor was deserted.

Then I walked quickly to Eve's room and entered.

Eve was sitting on the bed, the tape recorder on the bedside table. She looked pale and scared.

"For the love of Mike! You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'll be all right."

"You'll have to be," I said roughly. "I'm not going through with this if there are any doubts. The whole thing depends on your nerve, Eve."

She nodded.

"I know. You don't have to worry. I'll be all right when the time comes. I mean that."

I lit a cigarette and began to move about the room restlessly.

"You've taken your car down there?"

"I took it just after lunch. It's about ten yards the other side of the Drive Slow board, behind that big thicket."

"Fine." I went to the window and stared up at the fast moving clouds.

"It could rain, Eve."

"Yes."

"I hope it doesn't. It would be bad if it rained while I was changing the wheel."

She gave a little shiver.

"Will you go through with it if it rains?"

"I'll go through with it if there's an earthquake."

"What about footprints, Chad?"

"The road's too hard. You needn't worry about that." I suddenly remembered Joe. There had been so much for me to think of he had gone out of my mind. "We've forgotten Joe."

"I've taken care of him," Eve said, not looking at me. "I put the stuff in his tea."

"And I was beginning to think you might be losing your nerve." I went over to her and put my arms around her. "When will it work?"

She pushed me away.

"Don't touch me, Chad. I don't feel like it."

"Okay, okay," I said impatiently. "When will it work?"

"Any time now."

I looked at my watch. It was getting on for six.

"Take the recorder down to my study. I've set the stage. I'll go out in the garden and wait for her. Another three and a half hours, and we'll both be free, Eve."

"Yes."

She didn't look at me.

"I'll go down."

I wanted to take her in my arms but her strained expression stopped me.

"You'll go through with it, Eve?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do. It's just that there's still time to back out: soon there won't be."

"Do you want to back out?"

I thought of getting my hands on all that money. I thought of Eve and me marrying.

"No."

"I don't either."

"I'll go down."

Vestal drove up to the garage a few minutes after six. She hated driving the Rolls, and more often than not she only let Joe handle the car when she went shopping.

We walked side by side to the steps leading to the terrace. Heavy black clouds made a roof above our heads.

I couldn't believe in three hours' time I was going to kill her. It just didn't seem possible.

She was chattering away, looking up at me, a bright smile on her pinched, ugly little face, and I could see the love she had for me in her eyes.

"You look tired, darling. I think we should go away so you can have a rest."

"I'm all right," I said curtly. "You don't have to worry about me. I don't want to go away just yet."

"Let's talk about it. Will you come up and sit with me while I change?"

"I have some work to do. I'll come up in a little while. There're some papers I want Blakestone to look at."

She pouted. "You work too hard, Chad darling."

At the top of the steps, she slid her bony arms around my neck and kissed me.

I felt my stomach turn over, but somehow I managed to keep my expression from giving me away.

I went into my study and shut the door.

Eve had put the recorder on the desk. The chair was in the right position; its back to the door. The desk light and a lamp by the window were on.

The lighting was dim, restful and concealing. I went over to the window, pushed aside the curtains, opened the window and looked down on to the flagstone path. Even if it did rain there would be no telltale footprints to give me away.

I went back to the chair, unlocked the bottom drawer and checked the overall and the gloves. Underneath them was a tube of sacking filled with sand. I took it out and balanced it in my hand.

I suddenly felt sick as I swung the bag to and fro, and with a little grimace, I hurriedly dropped it back into the drawer and turned the key in the lock.

Everything was ready.

I had now to wait until nine o'clock.

As I stood staring emptily at the recorder I heard a sudden squall of rain beat against the windows.

A tap sounded on the door. Hargis came in.

"Excuse me, sir, Joe is unwell. I believe Mrs. Winters wanted the car tonight."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He complains of a headache, sir, and he is vomiting."

"Probably eaten something to disagree with him. I'll tell Mrs. Winters when she comes down."

"Yes, sir."

He went out and shut the door behind him.

I stood still, wiping my sweating hands and listening to the quick, violent beat of my heart.

chapter fourteen

I had three double whiskies before dinner. I needed them. I felt tense and my nerves were so jumpy I was scared Vestal would notice something was wrong.

The meal seemed to me to be interminable, and I had to force myself to eat.

When we finally moved into the lounge for coffee, Vestal went to the window, pushed aside the curtains and peered out into the dark, rain-swept night.

"This is most tiresome," she said crossly. "We haven't had rain for weeks. This would happen just when I'm going out."

"It always sounds worse indoors than it is," I said, sitting before the small log fire Hargis had lit to take the chill off the room. "It'll probably stop in a little while."

"It's simply pouring. I don't think I'll go if it keeps up like this."

Although I had been expecting her to say this, my heart skipped a beat.

Hargis was pouring coffee. I realized how important it was that he should be able to report later that I hadn't pressed Vestal to go.

"I don't blame you," I said casually. "There's a good television programme on tonight. Why don't you call Mrs. Hennessey and tell her you're not coming?"

Vestal came over to the fire. She took the cup of coffee Hargis offered her and sat down.

"It's most tiresome. I did so want to meet Mr. Stowenski. I don't like driving in the rain." She looked at Hargis. "Find out if Joe is feeling any better."

When he had gone, she went on, "What's the use of having a chauffeur if he gets ill when I want him?"

I forced a laugh.

"It's the first time, isn't it? Everyone gets ill sometimes. You'll be telling me next you can't drive in the rain. What are you worrying about?"

She looked sharply at me.

"Is anything the matter, Chad? You've been behaving most oddly all the evening."

I felt my nerves give a little jump.

"I have? Oh, nonsense. What do you mean?"

"I'm very sensitive to atmosphere. You're strung up tonight. Why, Chad?"

I started to say she was mistaken, when Hargis returned.

"I'm sorry, madam, but Joe has gone to bed. He still appears to be unwell."

"Then you'd better not go," I said, cutting in on her impatient exclamation. "This violinist fellow will have plenty of fans hanging around him. He isn't likely to miss you."

That seemed the right thing to say for Vestal immediately bridled angrily.

"He is expecting me," she said sharply. "I am quite sure he wouldn't have accepted Charlotte's invitation unless I was going. I must go."

"Well, please yourself," I said as Hargis left the room. "You won't get wet in the car, and if you're going you'd better get ready. It's nearly nine."

She went over to the window again.

"Chad, darling, you wouldn't be sweet and come with me?"

"I'm sorry, but Ryan Blakestone will be here in half an hour."

"Oh well, I'd better get ready." She came over to me and took hold of the lapels of my tuxedo, smiling up at me. "Sure you're not worried about anything, darling?"

"You fuss too much," I said, and taking hold of her I crushed my mouth down on hers.

We remained like that for two or three ghastly seconds, and when I pulled away from her, she caught hold of my hands.

"I needn't go tonight, Chad." There was that naked desire in her eyes I had seen at the Stadium. "We could be together."

"We'll be together later," I said, turning away so she shouldn't see the horror on my face. "You go now. I have Blakestone in my hair until eleven."

There was a long, awkward pause, then she said, "Tonight then, Chad."

When she had left the room, I went over to the whisky decanter and poured a big shot. My hands were shaking as I drained the glass.

A minute or so to nine she came in. She had on a white raincoat, a small black hat, and she was pulling on black leather gauntlet gloves.

"Come with me to the garage, Chad."

"If you'll excuse me, Vestal, I won't. I have some letters I must dictate before Blakestone comes."

She gave a helpless little shrug.

"I'm afraid I'm sometimes a nuisance to you." She looked at me, her eyes miserable. "Goodbye then."

"Have a good time."

As soon as I said it I realized the horror of those words, and I turned quickly so she shouldn't see my sudden change of expression.

"I think I'll enjoy it. I'll be back about twelve-thirty."

I heard her cross the room and go into the hall.

"Is it still raining, Hargis?" I heard her say.

"It doesn't appear to be quite so bad, madam. Can you manage?"

"Oh yes. I won't be very late."

As the front door closed behind her Eve came into the study.

We looked at each other.

She was pale, but there was an expression in her eyes I had never seen before. She didn't look scared anymore.

"I brought a cap for you," she said in a whisper. "You mustn't get your hair wet."

"Good girl."

I pulled off the jacket and tossed it on to the chair.

"It's up to you, now."

"It's all right."

I took the overall out of the desk drawer and got into it. She handed me the gloves and the cap.

"You must hurry."

"Take care of this end, Eve."

"It will be all right."

Looking at her I felt it would be all right. She had got her second wind now, and her nerves seemed steady.

I dipped into the drawer again and brought out the sandbag.

Eve moved away from me. I didn't look at her. I kept the sandbag down by my side, out of sight.

"You must hurry." There was a little shake in her voice now. The sandbag had suddenly brought the setup to life.

"I'll be back in half an hour. Keep your nerve, Eve. It'll work out all right."

I went to the window, opened it and swung my leg over the sill.

I looked back at her.

She stood by the desk, watching me.

"Good luck," I said.

She nodded. I saw her lips move, but no words came. I let myself drop to the flagstone path. A moment later the window above me closed.

It wasn't raining so hard now, but there was a stiff wind. I set off at a fast clip towards the garages.

Vestal had further to go than I had. She followed the coverway, and could walk from the house to the garages without getting wet.

I had to cross the lawn.

It was nearly pitch dark. I had no fear that anyone would see me from the house.

Keeping my head down, I ran across the lawn, feeling the rain against my face.

The garage was in darkness. The garage doors were controlled by a

photoelectric cell. As soon as anyone got within a few yards of them and broke the beam, the lights went up and the doors opened.

I took up a position near the doors, in a patch of shadow. The coverway from the house was dimly lit, and after I had waited a minute or so, I caught sight of Vestal's white raincoat in the distance.

My heart was slamming against my ribs, and my mouth was as dry as sand. I clutched the sandbag and waited.

She came quickly along the coverway. She was within fifteen yards of me now. She was humming under her breath, but as she passed close to me I could see her expression was worried and thoughtful.

She walked through the beam, the garage lights clicked on and the doors slid back.

I moved forward, holding my breath. My crepe-soled shoes made no sound on the tarmac.

She was opening the car door as I reached her. Instinct probably warned her. She stopped humming, and her head began to turn slowly.

Sudden terror gripped her. I saw her stiffen as I swung the sandbag. I hit her very hard on the top of her head. The smart black velvet hat gave her no protection. She dropped on to her knees, her hands sliding down the glittering panel of the car door.

My breath came whistling out between my clenched teeth. I set myself and slammed the sandbag down on her head again, hitting her with all my strength.

Her head jerked up and down. I dropped the sandbag and grabbed hold of her before she could spread out on the tarmac.

She was like a limp rag doll in my hands. I held her against me and opened the car door. Then I lifted her and shoved her on the bench seat, pushing her past the steering wheel to the far side, propping her up against the offside door.

I snatched up the sandbag, slid under the steering wheel, then remembered I hadn't the ignition key.

I was sweating and my hands were shaking.

She must have the key in her bag. I looked for her bag, but couldn't find it. I tried to remember if she had had a bag with her when she came to say goodbye. I was in too much of a panic to think clearly.

Time was getting on. The hands of the dashboard clock showed seven minutes past nine.

Cursing, I got out of the car and looked around the garage floor. I found her bag under the car. I grabbed it, got back into the car, rummaged amongst the junk she carried and found the key.

I looked quickly at her as I started the engine.

She lay limply against the car door, her head back, her eyes dosed, her mouth half open. She was breathing in slow, strangled gasps.

From under the black hat came a pencil line of blood.

I drove the car on to the tarmac, then increasing speed, sent it fast towards the long, rain-swept drive.

It took me around three minutes to reach the head of the diff road.

Away from the shelter of the trees the wind was much more violent than I had expected, and rain lashed against the windshield and the side windows.

It was difficult to see. I kept the wipers going, turned out the car lights and pulled up on the first bend of the road.

I had timed it close.

About a mile down the twisting road I saw the approaching lights of a car.

Blakestone was on his way up!

I grabbed hold of Vestal and pulled her on to my lap. She sprawled forward, but I pulled her upright and clamped her Limp hands to the steering wheel. Her head fell back and her cheek rested against mine. I squirmed further down on the seat, engaged gear and started the car, flipping on the headlights as I reminded the bend.

Blakestone's car was coming fast and I increased my speed. It wasn't easy driving with Vestal half obscuring my view, and I kept as close to the nearside of the road as I could. I would have to move over to the right when Blakestone passed me. It would be pretty funny, I thought, if I miscalculated and sent the car over the cliff before I had time to get out.

Blakestone must have seen my headlights for he dimmed his. As I was reaching for the dipper switch, Vestal suddenly began to move.

I was so startled I nearly drove the car off the road.

She let out a long, sighing groan that scared me as I've never been scared before.

I felt the car wheels bump up on the grass verge. I saw the white palings of the fence that guarded the nine-hundred foot drop racing past the car within touching distance.

I swung the car back on to the road, then grabbing Vestal by the back of her neck, I slammed her face down on to the top of the ledge of the dashboard.

The steering wheel, hitting her chest, broke some of the force, but her forehead came into contact with the ledge with sufficient force to knock her unconscious again.

I just managed to sit her upright when Blakestone's car passed.

He had slackened speed, but as I saw the car loom up, I trod down hard on the accelerator and swept past at a good forty miles an hour.

He tapped his horn button in greeting. I had too much on my hands to reply. I had to brake violently as I came upon the next bend in the road. At the speed I was going I could easily have failed to make the

bend.

Out of sight, around the bend, I pulled up, shoved Vestal once more against the offside door, got out of the car and ran up the road until I reached the bend.

I stood in the rain and wind and watched Blakestone's tail light disappear towards the house.

It would take him under five minutes to reach the house. I couldn't keep him waiting much longer than twenty minutes. I had twenty-five minutes to change the wheel, send the car over the cliff, locate Eve's car, drive back to the house, get in through the window, strip off my overall, and appear to Blakestone as if I had been spending the evening at my desk.

I suddenly quailed at the prospect. I had been crazy to have attempted such a plan. I couldn't possibly do what I had to do in the time. If I were late, would Eve's nerve fail? Blakestone must become suspicious as soon as he learned of Vestal's death.

Sweating, the rain pouring down on me, I returned to the car.

I opened the boot and dragged out the spare wheel. My fingers groped around the rim, hunting for the jagged hole in the outer cover. It crossed my mind that Joe might have discovered the blowout, and had changed the tyre, and I cursed myself for not thinking of this possibility before.

My fingers found the hole, and I caught my breath with a gasp of relief.

I got the wheel-key and a screwdriver from the toolbox and started in to change the wheel.

It was a hell of a job.

I didn't dare show a light, and I had to work more or less by touch. If it hadn't been for the wind and the rain the job would have been simple, but the wheel became slippery, I got mud on my hands, each nut seemed to be resisting my efforts to loosen it, and my increasing panic made me clumsy.

I got the wheel off at last, trundled it around to the back of the car and shoved it into the boot.

I paused to peer at my wristwatch. It had taken me seven minutes to get the wheel off; quicker than I had imagined, and that gave me heart to tackle the next job.

Getting the other wheel on was more difficult. I couldn't find the holes in the wheel to correspond with the bolts on the wheel axle. I fumbled and cursed and wrestled, wasting precious time. When finally the wheel did slip on, I found in my struggle I had kicked over the wheel cap in which I had put the wheel nuts. I found five of them, but the sixth had vanished. I didn't dare waste any more time looking for it. I tightened the five nuts, clipped on the wheel cap and again looked

at my watch.

I had only ten minutes left to get rid of the car and to get back to the house.

I opened the car door and got in, my hand reached out for the starter button. Then I stiffened; my body turned to ice. The offside seat was empty. Vestal had vanished!

chapter fifteen

The wind roared up from the valley and slammed against the side of the car while the rain came now in reluctant squalls, dying out, then starting again as the wind drove the clouds before it.

I sat staring at the empty offside seat, my heart thudding. Where was Vestal? She must have recovered consciousness while I had been changing the wheel.

I got out of the car and looked frantically up and down the road.

It was too dark to see more than five yards ahead of me, and cursing, I rushed back to the car and snapped on the headlights.

The powerful beams of light picked her out against the black, wet side of the cliff.

She was walking slowly away from the car, heading towards the valley, moving unsteadily, her hands held out before her, like a blind woman groping in an unfamiliar room.

She was about a hundred yards from the car, and for a long moment, I sat rigid, watching her through the rain-swept windshield.

My teeth were chattering, and I felt sick enough to throw up. I had to go after her. Time was running out.

I began to race down the hill. The beams of the headlamps sent a long, black shadow of myself ahead of me.

Vestal saw the moving shadow and she stopped, turned and faced me.

I approached her, my breath whistling through my clenched teeth.

"Chad! Oh, Chad! I'm so glad you've come," she moaned and staggered towards me. "There's been an accident. My head hurts."

She came into my arms before I could shove her off, and she leaned against me, twining her arms around my neck.

"I don't know what happened. I was hit on the head."

I got hold of her and tore her arms from my neck.

"You're hurting me," she cried. "Chad! What's the matter? What's happened?"

I remembered with horror something that had happened to me when I was a child. My father's dog went crazy one hot summer day and bit me in the arm. My father shot it. He was fond of the dog. He didn't want to shoot it. His aim was rotten. He shot the dog through the stomach, breaking its back.

I was watching from my bedroom window. I saw the dog drop, its back legs paralysed. It jerked about as if it were at the end of a spring. It was horrible to watch. My father tried to shoot it through the head. He fired three times before he hit the dog, and even then he didn't kill

it immediately. It took five ghastly minutes before it stopped its jerking and twitching. The memory of its death haunted my dreams for years.

It seemed to me now that I was being forced to reenact that distant scene again. Only this time it wasn't my father trying to kill a dog; it was me trying to kill a woman.

My brain tried to force my hands to grab her throat, but I knew she mustn't be found strangled. She must be found battered to death from a nine-hundred foot drop into space.

"Chad! What's the matter? Why don't you speak to me?"

"Okay, okay," I said, but the words made no sound. Only my lips moved as I stared down at her, feverishly wondering how to kill her.

I had turned slightly, and I stood in the full light of the car's lamps, and she looked at me. She must have seen from the expression on my face that I was about to murder her for she gave a sudden wild scream, turned and began to run frantically towards the car.

For several moments I was unable to move. I stood watching her, my heart scarcely beating, my breath coming in great sobbing gasps.

Then I moved after her. I couldn't run. My legs felt boneless. I went after her with slow, deliberate strides.

She looked back over her shoulder and saw me coming. I heard her thin wail of terror. She tried to increase her pace. She kicked against a stone, her ankle twisted and she fell on hands and knees.

She remained kneeling in the middle of the road in the full glare of the headlights, looking towards me, her blood-smeared face livid and ugly with terror.

As I approached her I saw a big stone lying on the grass verge. I moved to it, not slowing my pace, and as I passed it, I picked it up.

She knelt motionless, watching me. Her mouth hung open, her black hat soggy in the rain, her stockings were in ribbons.

I walked slowly up to her.

"Chad! Please! Don't touch me!" she cried, looking at me imploringly. "I do love you, Chad. I'll give you everything I have. Don't hurt me!"

I caught hold of her right wrist. I was shaking from head to foot. The great sharp flint stone felt like a dead weight in my hand.

"Chad!"

I can still hear that cry ringing in my ears as I sit here in this hot beach hut.

It was the most horrible sound I have ever heard.

As I raised the stone, she shut her eyes. She made no attempt to protect her head with her free hand. She just knelt motionless like a paralysed rabbit waiting for death.

I smashed the stone down on top of her head.

I felt the shock of the blow up my arm. I stepped back, shuddering.

She lay in the road the way the dog had lain at my father's feet, twitching and jerking, and I knew she was dying.

I couldn't pick up that twitching, dying rag doll. I couldn't bring myself to hold her close to me so I caught hold of her wrist and dragged her like a sack over the ground to the car.

I opened the car door and bundled her in, and as I touched her body I could feel her muscles fluttering under my hands.

I slammed the door shut and stood for a long moment fighting down my sickness.

It was done: finished, and now my life was in danger.

I remembered the stone. I ran back, picked it up and flung it far into the darkness of the valley, then I returned to the car, leaned inside and started the engine. I shoved the car until it began to move downhill, turning the steering wheel so the car headed towards the white fencing that guarded the nine-hundred foot drop.

The car was moving fast now. I stood in the rain and watched it.

Its great headlamps lit up the white fencing. It thudded up the grass verge and its glittering radiator smashed against the fencing.

There was a loud crackling sound of breaking wood. The car hung for a moment, then went over the cliff.

I stood listening to the crashing of falling rocks and the louder crashing as the car turned over and over as it fell through space.

I ran to the gaping hole in the fence and peered down.

The car had fallen about two hundred feet and was now resting against a great boulder. As I stared down at it, a little tongue of flame suddenly flickered from under the hood; a moment later the car was a roaring furnace.

As I slid my leg over the windowsill, I heard my voice saying: "Further to our telephone conversation and your letter of today's date, I confirm the arrangements we have made and look forward to hear more of your plans to develop the discussed property at Eden End."

It was the most reassuring sound I have ever heard.

Eve stood by the desk, staring at me, her eyes unnaturally large. The narrow tape of the recorder moved slowly and deliberately through the recording head; my voice that would establish my alibi talked on.

I climbed into the room. The overall I was wearing was soaked. There was mud on my shoes. My hands were filthy.

Eve snatched up a towel and a big sponge that lay on the desk and thrust them at me.

"Quickly! He's been waiting more than half an hour. There's only another two minutes of tape left."

I wiped my hands and face. I tore off the overall.

"How do I look?"

She nodded.

"Get your coat on."

I took the coat from her and slipped it on, then wiped my shoes clean with the sponge and ran a comb through my hair.

My legs felt so rocky I could scarcely stand.

She gave me a glass half-full of neat whisky.

"Drink it."

She had thought of everything. The liquor burned the back of my throat, but it stopped my muscles fluttering.

"Wipe your face."

I used the towel, took the cigarette she thrust at me and leaned forward to light it from the match she had struck.

"All right, Chad?"

"Yes."

"You'd better see him."

"All right here?"

"Yes. I was getting anxious. You're late, but it went just the way you said it would go."

I felt a surge of triumphant relief run through me.

"Okay, I'm ready."

She bundled up the towel, the sponge, the overall and my cap and shoved them into the deep drawer in my desk.

"I'll turn this off."

She switched off the recorder. The sudden silence in the room was louder than a crash of thunder.

I drew in a deep breath, then walked across the room and opened the door.

Blakestone was sitting in a lounging chair, thumbing through a magazine.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. I didn't mean to keep you this long."

He gave me a rueful grin.

"That's all right. Do you usually work so hard at home?"

"I have a lot on hand just now. Come on in."

As he entered my study, Eve slipped past us and went through the lounge into the hall.

"Have a drink, Ryan?"

"Well, I'll have another. Miss Dolan has been looking after me."

He sat down in a chair by my desk.

"I saw your wife in her Rolls as I was coming up. She drives damned fast; scared the pants off me."

"She knows the road backwards."

"She wasn't driving backwards," Blakestone said, his face serious. "She was going too damned fast." Seeing I didn't like what he was saying, he gave a little shrug and went on, "Nice place you have here."

"Not bad, is it?" I gave him a whisky and sat down behind my desk.

"Good of you to come, Ryan."

"I hope you have something good for me. What's the deal?"

"Bylands Appliances. Mean anything to you?"

"Of course. They've been making a pile of jack for someone. I've got a small piece of their stock myself."

"They'll hit the roof, Ryan. I thought you and I..."

The telephone bell rang sharply making me start.

My mind jumped to Vestal.

"Excuse me while I get this," I said and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Hennessey is on the line," Eve's voice whispered. "She's asking for Vestal. I told her she was on her way down to her, but she insists on speaking to you."

I'd forgotten Mrs. Hennessey, and just for a moment my heart skipped a beat.

"Okay, put her on," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

There was a click on the line, then Mrs. Hennessey's rasping voice buzzed in my ear.

"Mr. Winters?"

"That's right. Anything I can do?"

"I'm waiting for Vestal. Miss Dolan tells me she left half an hour ago. She hasn't arrived."

"She'll be along in a few minutes," I said, aware that Blakestone was listening and watching. "It's a bad night. She's probably taking it slowly."

"Isn't her chauffeur with her?"

"No, she's driving herself."

"She doesn't take more than twenty minutes to get here. She's already twenty minutes late."

"She'll be along. I believe she was a little late leaving here. I'm tied up right now, Mrs. Hennessey. You'll have to excuse me."

That appeared to be the worst thing I could have said. I wanted to calm her fears. The only way I could think of to do that was to sound casual. I saw my mistake as soon as she snapped, "She may have met with an accident. She was most anxious to be here before Mr. Stowenski arrived, and now he is actually having to wait for her. That road is very dangerous. I'm extremely worried and anxious. I think I should call the police."

My heart did a somersault. I thought of the soaking wet overall in my desk drawer; Eve's car still wet and muddy with the radiator hot from the rush up the cliff road. I thought of the possibility of blood marks on the road which I hoped would be wiped out in an hour or so by the rain. If this old bitch got the police up here before I was ready

for them I would be in a hell of a jam.

"You're getting worked up for nothing," I said sharply. "If she isn't with you in twenty minutes, call me back."

"And in the meantime she may be lying injured somewhere." The rasp in her voice was loud enough for Blakestone to hear. "I've never heard of such a thing!"

"Okay, okay, I'll go and see if she's in trouble," I said, trying to keep the exasperated fury out of my voice. "Call back if she arrives before I return. I'm quite sure you have nothing to worry about."

She started to tell me again how dangerous the road was and how worried she was, but I cut her short.

"You call me back," I said and hung up.

Blakestone looked at me inquiringly. I felt a trickle of sweat run down my face. I tried to control my expression, but I had an idea I wasn't being too successful.

"That damned old hen, Mrs. Hennessey, is getting worried about Vestal. Vestal had a date with her, and she hasn't arrived yet. Mrs. Hennessey thinks she has met with an accident. A lot of nonsense, of course. It wouldn't surprise me if Vestal had changed her mind and gone to a movie instead."

Blakestone's expression startled me. He looked anxious.

"It is a dangerous road, Chad, and as I told you, she was driving fast."

"Now don't you start for the love of Mike. Vestal knows that road backwards. She wouldn't take a risk." I reached forward for a sheet of paper on which I had made some calculations. "Come on, let's get down to work. Take a look at these figures."

He took the paper reluctantly.

"You're sure we shouldn't go out and see if there's been trouble, Chad?"

"It's my bet she's gone to a movie. It's raining like hell."

He stared at me, his mouth tightening.

"Well, she's your wife."

"Quit fussing!" I snapped. "Let's do some work!"

Once he did concentrate on the figures, he quickly forgot to worry about Vestal. For the next twenty minutes we discussed the various angles I wasn't sure about, and as usual, I found his advice sound.

I was just about to pour another drink for him when the telephone bell rang.

I could see by the expression on his face that his mind had jumped back to Vestal and he looked at me sharply.

I picked up the receiver.

"This is Lieutenant Leggit. Have you any news of Mrs. Winters?"

My mouth turned dry. I knew I was losing colour. I half-turned and

reached for a cigarette so Blakestone couldn't get a good view of my face.

"I've heard nothing. I was expecting..."

"I'm at Mrs. Hennessey's place," Leggit snapped, breaking in. "Your wife hasn't shown up. She's forty minutes late. I'm coming right over."

"You don't have to do that. I'll get my car out..."

But he had hung up.

I had to make a tremendous effort to keep my voice steady.

"I'm sorry, Ryan," I said, getting to my feet, "but I'll have to break this up. Vestal hasn't shown up, and the police are coming over."

His face tightened.

"The police?"

"Lieutenant Leggit. He appears to have been at the party." I lit a cigarette. My hand was shaking. "He's a pal of Vestal's. I'll get my car and go down the road and see if anything's happened. I'm quite sure this is a false alarm, but I'd better see just the same."

"I have my car outside. I'll come with you."

We crossed the lounge, and as we opened the door into the hall Eve appeared.

"Mrs. Hennessey thinks Mrs. Winters might have met with an accident," I said to her. "Lieutenant Leggit is coming up right away. I'm going down the cliff road to see if there's anything to see."

Eve's face was expressionless.

"I hope there's nothing wrong. Mrs. Winters is such a safe driver."

"I'm going anyway."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You might clear up in my study. There're some papers that need filing."

Our eyes met. She knew what I meant. Those things in the desk drawer had to be hidden.

Blakestone had crossed the hall and opened the front door. He was looking impatiently at me.

"The car," I whispered to Eve. "It's wet. Do something about it."

I turned away and joined him at the door.

"It's raining like hell," he said, struggling into his coat. "Come on; it won't take us five minutes."

I followed him into the darkness.

chapter sixteen

In the glare of two searchlights, mounted on a breakdown truck, and in the pouring rain, ten police officers and twenty firemen laboured to get Vestal's body up the cliffside.

It was perilous work. Three firemen had gone down on chair slings. The car had been caught between two massive boulders some two hundred feet down the cliff face. Every foot of the way was menacing, as loose stones and fair sized rocks were ready to crash down at the slightest touch.

I sat in Blakestone's car, a cigarette burning between my fingers, my body cold and shaking.

Blakestone sat beside me. He didn't say anything, but smoked and stared out of the rain-swept window, watching the small group of policemen peering over the cliff head.

Just behind us Eve sat in her car. She had been pretty smart to get her car and come after us. Its wet and muddy condition would now no longer be suspicious.

I wanted very badly to go to her, I knew that would be dangerous, so I sat still, waiting, my mind going over every detail of the past two hours as I tried to reassure myself that I hadn't made a mistake.

A tall, broad shouldered figure loomed out of the rain.

"I have some bad news for you, Mr. Winters," Leggit said, leaning against the car and peering at me through the window. "She's dead. They've just found her."

I forced myself to look up and meet his hard, blue eyes.

"I didn't think she could be alive," I said slowly. "I hope it was quick."

"Yeah." I felt his eyes boring into me. "You'd better get back to the house. No point sticking around here. You can leave everything to me."

"Thanks," I said.

His direct gaze shifted from me to Blakestone.

"Who's he?"

"Ryan Blakestone, my broker. He was with me tonight."

I could have bitten off my tongue as soon as I said that. I knew it was a mistake. I shouldn't have offered an alibi unless he asked me for it.

He nodded and stepped back.

"Okay, Mr. Winters. I'll see you in the morning."

"I'll wait for you at the house."

"Want me to drive, Chad?" Blakestone asked when Leggit had

moved back to the cliff head.

"It's okay."

I reversed the car and pulled alongside Eve's car.

"We can't do anything, Miss Dolan. Vestal's dead. I'm going back. You'd better come too."

I pulled away to save her thinking of something to say that Blakestone could hear, and drove to the house in silence.

Blakestone wouldn't come in. He said a few words of sympathy, added he would take care of the Bylands Appliances and drove off.

I went into my study.

I sat down. My legs were shaky and the sick feeling of shock had hold of me. With an unsteady hand I poured myself a shot of whisky and gulped it down.

Eve came in and shut the door.

"What did you do with the overall?" I asked.

"It's in my room drying. I'll put it back in the garage first thing tomorrow."

"You're sure Hargis and Blakestone were satisfied I was in the study?"

"Yes. It was so good I almost believed you were there myself."

"You'd better tell Hargis Vestal's dead."

"Yes."

I got unsteadily to my feet. I wanted the comfort of her arms around me.

"We're free, Eve. Do you realize that?"

Her pale face was completely expressionless. Her blue eyes glittered behind her glasses.

"Yes."

I moved towards her.

"In a few months' time well be married."

"Keep away from me!"

Her tone brought me up short as if I had walked into a brick wall.

"What do you mean? We're safe in this room. What's the matter?"

"We're safe nowhere! Keep away from me. If Lieutenant Leggit thought there was anything between us, he would know we planned this." Her voice was scarcely above a whisper. "I'm through with you, Chad! Do you understand? You are to keep away from me!"

I felt a chill run up my spine.

"Through with me? What are you talking about? You're going to marry me!"

Her eyes flashed.

"I wouldn't marry you now if you were the last man on earth! I'm through with you! Don't you understand English?"

"You promised!"

"Never mind what I promised. I'm frightened. If the police found out about us they would know we did it. I'm leaving this house as soon as I can and I never want to see you again!"

"You're not getting away with that!" I said, suddenly furious. "Remember what I said! If you don't marry me, I'll give myself up and you too!"

"All right, go ahead and do it! You can't bluff me, Chad. I may be in this as much as you, but you killed her. Go ahead and tell them you did it if you dare. But keep away from me!"

She swung around and left the room.

For a long minute I stood staring at the door, unable to believe she meant what she said. My heart banged against my side, and my legs felt so shaky I had to sit down.

Why had she suddenly changed like this? Was she really frightened or was there something more behind it than I knew?

My mind shifted to Larry. Was he anything to do with her sudden change of attitude?

After a while I decided she was scared, and given time, she would get her nerve back.

I would leave her alone for a few days, then I'd wait my opportunity and have another, talk with her.

I wasn't going to lose, her.

I went slowly up to my dressing room and shut myself in.

I didn't sleep that night.

Lying in bed, listening to the rain and the wind, thinking of the horrible way Vestal had died, feeling that Eve was slipping away from me were thoughts enough to keep any man awake, but oddly enough they weren't keeping me from sleep.

I realized that I was becoming frightened: more frightened than I had ever been before in my life.

I knew the police could come to this house and take me away and keep me in a cell until it was time to burn me alive in the chair.

They could do that to me now if I had made one little slip, and I had no means of knowing or of finding out if I had made a slip.

I was frightened all right: too frightened even to worry about Eve.

The following morning Seemed interminable. I sat in my study waiting for something to happen. Leggit had said he was coming to see me, but he appeared to be in no hurry. A little after eleven o'clock, I decided that perhaps he wasn't coming and I should get down to the office.

The house was unnaturally quiet. I had caught a glimpse of Hargis as I had come down for breakfast. He looked pale and seemed to have aged.

He didn't look my way, and I didn't speak to him.

The two maids who served my breakfast were red-eyed with weeping, and this surprised me. I had no idea any of the staff were fond enough of Vestal to regret her death.

As I was pushing back my chair to get up, the telephone bell rang.

I lifted the receiver.

"Hallo, yes?"

"Chad?" It was Blakestone's voice. "I thought I'd call you. Lieutenant Leggit has been to see me. He's been asking all kinds of questions. Have you seen him yet?"

Again I felt a chill run up my spine.

"No, not yet. What kind of questions, Ryan?"

"It's damned odd. It's almost as if he suspects you of having something to do with your wife's death."

I opened and shut my mouth, but no words came.

"You there, Chad?"

I got hold of myself. My hand gripped the receiver until my knuckles turned white.

"I didn't get that, Ryan. What was that again?"

"I said he seems to suspect you of having something to do with Mrs. Winters's death. I told him he was crazy."

"What sort of questions did he ask?"

"He wanted to know if you were out between nine and ten last night. I told him we were working together. He kept on and on until I asked him what he was driving at. He said when a wife dies mysteriously, a husband is automatically the first suspect."

"Damned rot!" I said, trying to steady my voice. I was thankful he couldn't see my face. I knew it was a complete giveaway at this moment. "Besides, Vestal didn't die mysteriously. She drove over the cliff."

"I told him that. I told him too you were dictating letters at the time of Vestal's death. I said if you didn't believe me he could ask Miss Dolan and Hargis. I thought I'd better tip you off, Chad. I have an idea that guy doesn't like you too much."

"He was a pal of Vestal's. Naturally he feels sore she's dead."

"Well, I thought I'd tell you. I guess he's looking for a job. I told him Mrs. Winters was driving too fast. The crash must have happened a few seconds after I had passed her. That makes me feel bad. I might have..."

"You couldn't have done a thing. Well, thanks for calling, Ryan. There's nothing to worry about. You and I know I couldn't have had anything to do with Vestal's death. He'll probably drop the idea now he's talked with you."

"I hope so. You can rely on me to rally around if you need me."

I thanked him and hung up.

I got to my feet and went over to the window and stared down at the long stretch of garden.

I had been waiting for something to happen and now too much was happening. So Leggit was already wondering if I could have had anything to do with Vestal's death. That was smart of him. I wondered uneasily if I had underestimated him. Well, he might be suspicious, but he would soon run up against a brick wall. After he had talked to Hargis and Eve, he would know he could never get his hooks into me.

The time now was twenty minutes to twelve. I glanced out of the window and saw a car standing on the tarmac; at the driving wheel was a cop.

My heart did a somersault.

Leggit had arrived!

I waited.

As the minutes dragged by I got my second wind. This was a matter of life and death. If I couldn't control my nerves, I was sunk. I pushed back my chair and crossed over to the liquor cabinet. I poured myself a shot of whisky and gulped it down. Then I went back to my desk and pulled some papers towards me.

I tried to settle to work but although my eyes read the typewritten words, the words were meaningless. I sat there, staring at the sheet of paper and waited. I waited for three quarters of an hour before a knock came on the door and Leggit walked in.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," I said, getting to my feet. "Come on in. Will you have a whisky?"

I was surprised to hear how steady my voice sounded.

He gave me a hard, searching stare as he pulled up a chair to my desk and sat down. His great bulk made the chair creak as he settled himself.

"No, thanks."

I pushed the box of cigarettes across the desk. I was aware that his eyes were still examining me. I could feel them going over me with a thoroughness that suddenly made me angry.

Why should I be scared of this big, slow-witted cop! I was now worth sixty million dollars. I owned this palace of a house. I had property all over the country. Only sixteen months ago I was earning less than he was now. Didn't that prove I was smarter than he could ever be?

I watched him light his cigarette, then I lit mine.

"Have you found out how the accident happened, Lieutenant?" I asked at length as he made no move to say anything.

"The on-side front tire burst."

"I see." I looked down at my hands to hide the look of triumph I knew had jumped into my eyes.

"I understand you were in the study from nine to ten last night, Mr. Winters?"

I stiffened and looked up.

"Why, yes. I was dictating letters, and then my broker and I worked until Mrs. Hennessey telephoned."

"You were dictating on a tape recorder?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with the accident, Lieutenant? I don't follow you."

His hard eyes stared stonily at me. "It wasn't an accident."

My heart skipped a beat and then began to race.

"Not an accident? But surely..."

He leaned forward.

"It was murder, Mr. Winters."

chapter seventeen

The clock on my desk ticked noisily in the silence that followed.

My mind darted this way and that like a scared mouse in a trap. How had he found that out so quickly? Had I left some damning clue? Did he know I had done it? Had I made some fatal mistake? Was he going to arrest me?

Somehow I kept control of my expression. I had to say something believable and at once.

"Murdered? You can't mean that!"

"She was murdered."

"But how do you know?"

"We'll get around to that in a moment. I want to talk to you about this alibi of yours."

"Alibi? You—you don't think I had anything to do with Vestal's death, do you?"

He stubbed out his cigarette before saying, "When any wife gets herself murdered, the husband automatically becomes suspect number one."

"But this is ridiculous!" I forced anger into my voice. "How do you know it was murder?"

"Have you got that tape recorder here?"

"What tape recorder? What are you talking about?"

"You were dictating letters between nine and ten last night. Between nine and ten Mrs. Winters was murdered. The recorder is your alibi, isn't it? I want it."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but it contains a number of business letters. They haven't been typed yet."

"I'll have a copy made and let you have it. Where is it?"

I hesitated, then shrugged.

"You're behaving in a most extraordinary way, but I suppose you better have it if you want it so badly. It's on the machine."

He got up, crossed over to the tape recorder, lifted the lid and took off the completed spool.

"Scratch your initials on the end of the tape, will you?" he said. "Just here."

I picked up a letter opener and scratched my initials on the narrow ribbon.

He grunted and dropped the spool into his pocket.

"Right." He sat down again. "I understand you and Hargis don't get on so well together?"

"No. He dislikes me and I have no use for him. What of it?"

"He tells me he saw you in this room at ten minutes past nine and again at twenty minutes past nine."

"He did. He brought coffee, and then later he announced Mr. Blakestone. What does all this mean?"

"What does it mean?" His face was like flint now. "You know as well as I do! You murdered your wife, and I want to know how you did it!"

I sat motionless, staring at him. I could feel the blood leaving my face.

Cold hooks of fear sank into my guts.

"I didn't kill her!" I heard myself whisper.

"Oh yes, you did. That's the one thing I'll bet my life on," Leggit said. "I knew she was heading for trouble the moment I saw her with you. I know all about you, Winters! I know what your reputation is with women. You wouldn't have married Vestal Shelley if she hadn't any money. You couldn't get what you wanted out of her so you killed her. How the hell did you do it?"

I got a grip on myself. He was bluffing. He couldn't prove a thing. I was sure of that. I had only to keep my nerve and call his bluff and he would have to back down.

"Okay; if you're so damned sure I killed her, go ahead and arrest me," I said, leaning forward to glare at him.

He stretched out his massive legs, and his big, fleshy face looked suddenly sleepy.

"You've been smart, Winters, but not quite smart enough. You murdered her all right, but how you were in two places at once beats me. This talk is off the record. Vestal Shelley was a friend of mine. I've known her for years. She had her faults, and sometimes she wasn't too easy to get along with, but I liked her. I was sorry for her too. She didn't get much fun out of her money. She would have given it all away for some looks. I regarded her as a friend, and no one murders a friend of mine, and gets away with it. You may have been smart, Winters, but I'm going to nail you— make no mistake about that!"

"You're crazy!" I said, banging my fist on the desk. "I was working here all the evening! Ask Hargis and Blakestone: they saw me!" Although I tried to control my voice, it went up into a shout. "You can't pin this on to me, Leggit, and you know it!"

"You've already made one mistake, and you'll make another. You smart punks always make mistakes. I'm patient, and I'll wait. At the moment, you're sitting pretty. I admit it. I know you killed her, but you've got what seems to be a cast-iron alibi. How you managed to be in two places at once I don't pretend to know, but I'm damn well going to find out, and when I do, you're as good as dead!"

I glared at him. What was I to be scared of? He admitted I had beaten him. Suppose he did know I had killed Vestal? What did it

matter so long as he couldn't prove it?

I sat back, trying to relax.

"What makes you think I killed her?" I said. "Tell me that!"

"I'll tell you," he said. "You planned the murder to look like an accident. The idea was this: as your wife was driving down the cliff road, the on-side tire was to burst, and the car, out of control, would go over the cliff head. You waited for her in the garage. You hit her over the head. You took her in the car and drove down the cliff road to the first dangerous bend. In the boot, you had a burst tire. You changed a good tire for the burst tire, then you steered the car over the cliff head. That's what you did, didn't you?"

I had hold of myself by now. One slip and I was finished. I knew that.

I looked fixedly at him.

"Go ahead and prove it. I was in this room all the evening!"

"I'll prove it," he said quietly. "You made a bad mistake, Winters. The burst inner tube contained a quantity of sand. There's no sand where the car lodged. There's no sand on the cliff road. Where did the sand come from? It's my bet the tire burst several days ago—probably on the Eden End road. You changed the wheel and stored the burst tire in the boot, overlooking the sand that had worked into the inner tube. When I checked I found one of the wheel nuts was missing. We searched around and we found it. It was on the cliff road, and it proves you changed the wheel before sending the car over the cliff head. How do you like that?"

I sat motionless, looking at him. I was sick with fright, but I didn't let him see it.

"Prove it," I said, "Prove I did it."

"You couldn't have done it alone." He was leaning forward, staring at me. "You worked some trick with the tape recorder. I'll get around to it, but you couldn't have done it alone. Did Eve Dolan help you? Is she behind this? Was it she who put you up to killing your wife, Winters?"

I felt sweat start out on my face.

"Why should she? You're crazy! Neither of us had anything to do with it!"

"Why should she?" he repeated, and he showed his teeth in a fixed grin. "Haven't you seen your wife's will yet, Winters?"

That startled me.

"Of course I haven't. What has her will to do with this?"

"Plenty. Miss Dolan benefits from the will."

"So what? Vestal told me. She left Miss Dolan fifty thousand dollars. It's a nice sum, but not big enough to make her commit murder. You know that as well as I do!"

"Who said it was fifty thousand?" Leggit asked, his bleak eyes searching my face. "Your wife left her thirty million bucks. She's got this house too. You weren't so smart, Winters. All you get out of your murder is three million dollars. That's all your wife left you. Because her secretary is plain and dowdy, she gets the rest. Didn't you know?"

I felt a cold chill run on my spine.

"You're lying!" I said, my fists clenching.

He smiled at me.

"That's hit you where you live, hasn't it? I've seen the will. You get three million. Eve Dolan gets all your wife's property, this house and thirty million; the rest of the money goes to charities and legacies. Your wife states in the will you never liked taking money from her, and she apologizes for leaving you any at all. Rather overplayed your hand, haven't you?"

Somehow I kept control of myself, but only just. Had I been Eve's cat's-paw? Had she and Larry between them lured me into murdering Vestal? That could explain her sudden change of attitude towards me. I wouldn't marry you now if you were the last man on earth. Wasn't that proof enough she didn't love me; never had loved me? She had admitted reading the will. She must have known she would come into all that money. She was still in love with Larry. Being heiress to thirty million dollars would give her the power to beckon to him, knowing he would come a running.

A cold, ferocious knot of rage began to form inside me. I knew Leggit was watching me, and I forced my eyes to meet his.

"If it is true then Miss Dolan's a very lucky woman," I said, shrugging. "Three million is enough for me. Make what you like out of it, Leggit, but you can't prove anything."

"Did she help you?" he asked, staring fixedly at me. "Was that the way you worked it? You two somehow managed to hoodwink Hargis and Blakestone into believing they saw you in this room while all the time you were out there on the cliff head murdering your wife!"

I felt a trickle of sweat run down my face. He was getting too damn near the truth for comfort.

"Go ahead and dream your pipe dreams. I didn't kill Vestal. I was working here all the evening, and I have witnesses to prove it!"

He got slowly out of his chair.

"I'm going to get you for this, Winters. I'll break that alibi of yours if it's the last thing I do. It's going to give me a lot of satisfaction when I come here to collect you. It won't be long. When a killer tries to be as smart as you have been, he usually forgets something, and don't forget — a jury hates a smart killer!"

"Go on talking," I said, glaring up at him. "It won't get you anywhere!"

"Wait and see! I'm going to check that alibi until it falls to pieces. Somewhere along the line there's a hole in it, and I'll find it!"

He walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

I moved unsteadily across to the window and watched him drive away.

Later, I took the car and drove out to Eden End where I could be alone. I pulled up near the sand dunes, lit a cigarette and did some solid thinking. I was badly shaken. I knew now everything depended on my alibi. I knew it was cast-iron so far, otherwise Leggit would have taken a risk and arrested me.

I sat in the sunshine and went over that alibi with a toothcomb, trying to find one flaw in it, and the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that it was unbreakable.

There was no way to break it. No jury would convict me on Hargis's evidence. They'd quickly find out that he hated me, and it would be obvious to them that he must be speaking the truth if he told them he not only heard me dictating letters, but he had seen me as well.

My fears receded.

Leggit was bluffing. His only hope was to act mysteriously in the hope my nerves would crack. Well, he wasn't going to get far with those tactics. Once I had reassured myself that I was safe, I turned my mind to Eve.

I was sure now she had double-crossed me. She had fooled me into believing she loved me. She had subtly encouraged me to kill Vestal, promising to marry me if I did so. She knew all the time she was coming into Vestal's money, and she was gambling on the fact I wouldn't dare give her away and give myself away too. In that she was right. She might get off with a life sentence, but I had no doubts what would happen to me.

I suddenly wanted to get my fingers around her lovely white throat.

In a day or so she would be leaving Cliffside. She might disappear and I'd never find her again. That wouldn't do. I had to take action before she vanished.

I must have her watched. There was a little guy I knew who did confidential work for the bank. He might be right for the job. I drove back to Little Eden and went to his office.

His name was Joshua Morgan. His dusty office was on the top floor of a block down a side street off Roosevelt Boulevard.

He was pint size, fiftyish, with a straggly moustache, a mortician's manner and a huge forehead that made him look like a gnome.

He seemed pleased to see me.

"I have a job for you," I said, sitting down by his desk. "I want a woman watched. I don't care how many men you use. Watch her day and night—understand? I want to know where she is every hour of the

twenty-four hours. Can you do it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Winters." The pink-rimmed, grey eyes stared inquisitively at me. "Who is the lady?"

"Her name's Eve Dolan. At the moment she is living at my house, Cliffside, but I expect her to leave within the next twenty-four hours. She's dark and wears glasses and isn't much to look at. Your men can't miss her. She's the only woman, apart from the servants, staying at the house."

He nodded and scribbled on a pad of paper.

"You want me to cover this immediately?"

"That's the idea. If you lose her, Morgan, you've seen the last of me. Do your job well, and it's worth a thousand bucks. Okay?"

"Leave it to me, Mr. Winters. We won't lose her."

"And make certain she doesn't suspect she's being watched. That's important."

I drove back to Cliffside.

Hargis was in the hall.

I wasn't giving him the chance to walk out on me.

"I'm making other arrangements," I said to him. "You can quit whenever you like: the sooner the better."

"I intend to leave tonight," he said, drawing himself up.

I grinned at him.

"Fine. Any of the other staff leaving?"

"All of them," he said curtly and began to move away.

I hadn't bargained for that. I felt a spurt of fury run through me.

"See they leave their addresses and you leave yours. Lieutenant Leggit may still want you. Miss Dolan will settle your wages. Is she in?"

"No, sir. She said she would be returning some time after six."

I had a sudden vision of cornering Eve in this great house without anyone to come to her aid. A cold, vicious rage took hold of me when I thought what I would do to her.

"Then I'll pay you now. I want you and the rest of the staff out of here in an hour."

He looked fixedly at me.

"Very well."

"Have everyone come to my study in a quarter of an hour."

It wasn't until they had paraded before my desk that I realized how many servants Vestal had employed. There were thirty of them, including five Chinese gardeners.

It was an embarrassing little ceremony. I had found Eve's wages book in her desk, and I gave each of them two weeks' wages. They filed past my desk, collected their money and went out. None of them met my eyes; none of them spoke.

Hargis was the last.

As he picked up the money I shoved across the desk at him, he said in a low voice, "I believe and hope you will suffer for what you did to Miss Vestal, sir. I am quite sure if she had never set eyes on you, she would be alive today."

I looked at him.

It would be his testimony that would save me from the chair. The situation suddenly struck me as comic. I grinned.

"Get out, you silly old fool, before I throw you out!"

He crossed the room with the dignity of an archbishop. He even remembered to shut the door quietly behind him.

I looked at my desk clock. The time was twenty minutes to five. At half past five the staff left in a body.

Five of them had cars. They all managed to squeeze into the cars, and by five-thirty they had gone.

The great, rambling house seemed suddenly to have died. The only sounds I could hear was the busy ticking of the desk clock, and the steady thump of my heart.

I sat motionless, concealed behind the window curtain. I looked! down the long, neat drive and waited for Eve.

chapter eighteen

Dusk was falling when I saw Eve's little coupe coming up the drive. I had sat by the window for three hours waiting for her, and as each minute of those hours dragged away, so my rage against her mounted.

I realized now that it was she who had dropped the seed of murder into my mind. I remembered saying to her when we had spent our first night together in this house that we might be too old to enjoy Vestal's money when we did get it, and her reply.

She had said: "There's Providence."

"You mean she might get ill, meet with an accident and die?" I had said.

"People do," she had replied.

She had been the one to mention death. She had planned to persuade me to murder Vestal, probably from the moment she learned I was going to marry Vestal.

I moved back from the window and watched her come out of the garage and walk briskly up the steps and along the terrace to the front door.

I moved silently across the room, across the lounge and slipped behind one of the big settees.

I heard her open the front door and cross the hall. She came into the lounge. She stood looking around for a moment, then turned and walked back into the hall and up the stairs.

I waited until she had rounded the bend in the broad stairway, then I moved silently into the hall, turned the key in the front door and dropped it into my pocket.

I stood, listening.

I could hear her mounting the stairs, and then walk along the passage to her room.

A moment or so passed, then somewhere in the servants' quarters a bell rang faintly.

This was her house now. She was entitled to ring for a servant. She was entitled to give orders.

I walked up the stairs, my hand on the banister rail, my feet making no sound on the thick carpet.

As I reached the head of the stairs, the bell rang again.

She was the mistress of this house now, and she was entitled to be impatient. No servant had ever kept Vestal waiting. No servant should keep Eve waiting.

I opened one of the spare bedroom doors and stepped into the room, leaving the door ajar.

The bell rang again: long and persistently. Then I heard a door open, and Eve came out of her room. I watched her walk along the passage and pause over the banisters.

There was a puzzled, angry expression on her face. She had taken off her glasses and was holding them in her hand. She was wearing a black, frumpy looking frock which made her look paler than she was.

She leaned over the banisters. She looked down into the vast ball and listened.

The only sound that came to both of us was the steady ticking of the grandfather's clock.

She stood motionless for some moments, then she went along the corridor to where a house telephone stood on a table.

I watched her dial impatiently. She held the receiver to her ear, and in the silence, I could hear the steady and unanswered burr-burr of the buzzer. After a long moment of listening, she replaced the receiver.

There was a sudden wary expression in her blue eyes.

She looked quickly up and down the corridor, then she walked hurriedly down the stairs.

I moved out into the corridor, crept to the banisters and looked into the hall.

She was standing in the middle of the hall, listening.

"Hargis!"

Her voice came sharply to me.

She waited, and then she abruptly walked over to Vestal's study door and opened it. She went in, leaving the door open, Again I heard the persistent ring of a bell in the servants' quarters.

I went to the head of the stairs.

I heard the whirring of the telephone dial. I went down the stairs swiftly and silently. As I reached the hall I heard the receiver slam back on its cradle. I stepped behind a suit of armour as she came out into the hall again.

Her movements were uneasy. I could almost hear the thud of her heart.

She looked about the dark, gloomy hall. She was listening now like someone who has heard a stealthy sound and is frightened.

I watched her, savouring her growing fear. I was in no hurry. The whole night was before me.

"Is there anyone here?" she said pitching her voice up. There was a little shake in it. "Hargis! Why don't you answer me?"

Only the steady ticking of the clock disturbed the heavy silence that followed.

She gave an angry shrug and turned to the stairs. Then she paused and looked back over her shoulder, and again she listened.

"They can't have all gone," she said, half to herself.

She turned around, and moving quickly, she crossed the hall to the front door. She took hold of the big iron latch and pulled at the door, but I had locked it, and it didn't move.

I came out silently from behind the suit of armour while she was tugging at the door, and took up my position in the middle of the hall.

"It's locked, Eve," I said softly.

She whirred around with a sharp little scream. She leaned against the massive door, staring at me, her blue eyes wide with fright, her hand covering her mouth.

"You look scared," I said. "Have you a guilty conscience, Eve?"

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she said hoarsely.

"Can't you guess? I've heard about the will."

She flinched.

"I don't know what you mean. Where's Hargis? I've been ringing for Marianne. Where is she?"

I smiled.

"They have all gone. I paid them off. There's no one here except you and I, Eve. We're alone together."

She gave a little gulp, then pushed away from the front door and moved slowly and cautiously around me.

I turned, following her with my eyes.

"Frightened, Eve?" I asked.

"Why should I be frightened? I'm going to my room."

"Not yet. I want to talk to you."

"I have nothing to say to you. We shouldn't be alone here together. I must leave tonight."

"I don't think you will. I doubt very much if you will feel like leaving, Eve."

I moved suddenly and quickly, cutting off her retreat to the stairs.

"I was forgetting to congratulate you. How does it feel to own a house as big as this one, and have thirty million dollars to call your own?"

"I can't help it if she left me the money, can I?" she said breathlessly. "It wasn't my fault."

"Did you and Larry plan to tempt me into murdering her or was it just your idea?"

"It was your idea, and you know it!"

"Oh no, it wasn't. No wonder you don't want to marry me now. Larry will fall over himself to get you back so he can spend your money, won't he?"

She stiffened and her pale face-hardened.

"I've had enough of this! I'm going upstairs to pack."

I smiled at her.

"Leggit knows you and I did it. He was here this afternoon, and he

told me exactly how we did do it."

She went white.

"You're lying!"

"I wish I was. He's a lot smarter than I thought. He found some sand in the inner tube of the burst tire. There was no sand where the car lodged, nor any sand on the cliff road. That told him it was murder. He suspects you more than me. You have the motive, Eve. He asked me if you had talked me into murdering Vestal. That's how close he is to you."

She took a quick step back.

"What did you say to him?" she asked, her voice shrill.

"I told him to prove it. I don't think he can, but he might. If he does, Eve, you'll go to the chair too."

"You're trying to frighten me! I don't believe you!"

"You don't have to believe me. If he cracks that alibi of ours, you'll know fast enough what it feels like to be arrested. They won't be gentle with you."

"He can't prove it!"

"I hope not. Have you broken the good news to Larry yet? Is that where you have been all the afternoon?"

"That's nothing to do with you! I'm going upstairs to pack!"

"You love him still, don't you? You're going to bring him here to live, aren't you? Does he know anything about the murder?"

"Leave me alone!" she said, backing away.

"Can't you guess what's going on in my mind, Eve? I'm trying to decide if it's safe to kill you. I want to kill you. I want to get my hands around that lovely throat of yours and choke your cheating, lying breath out of your body!"

"You don't know what you are saying!"

I began to move slowly towards her.

"I don't think it would be safe to kill you, but that doesn't mean you're going to get away with this. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have killed Vestal. I wanted you as I've never wanted any other woman before. I wanted to marry you, and you promised. All the time you were fooling me. Don't think you're going to get away with it because you're not."

She suddenly dived past me and ran towards the stairs. I went after her.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, she dodged swiftly, and my reaching hand slid off her shoulder. She darted into Vestal's study.

She was behind the desk as I entered the room, and we stared at each other.

"Keep away from me!" she said breathlessly. "Have you gone crazy?"

I grinned at her.

"I'm going to teach you not to cheat. I'm going to give you a beating. I'm going to flay the flesh off your back!"

She jerked open a drawer in the desk as I came for her. I was reaching out for her when I saw the gun in her hand. That stopped me as if I had walked into a brick wall.

"Come and flay me," she said softly, and her fingers curled around the trigger. The blunt nose of the .38 pointed at my chest.

We glared at each other. The look of hate and loathing in her eyes shocked me.

"Not so brave now, are you?" she said. "You don't think I'd be such a fool as to come back here without some means to protect myself. Come near me, and I'll kill you!"

I stepped back.

The sight of the gun and the expression on her face sent a chill up my spine.

"Yes, Chad, I cheated you. I fooled you too," she said. "And there's nothing you can do about it. I knew she was going to leave me all that money. I played on her pity. She was a sucker for anyone plain and as ugly as she was. When you came along, I saw my chance. Why should I wait years and years for her to die, when you could kill her?" She leaned forward. "Marry you? I hate you. I've hated every moment of your filthy lovemaking. Sometimes I've wondered if all that money was worth pretending to love you. Well, I have it now, and I've paid for it, and you can't touch it. This house belongs to me too! Now, get out! Keep away from me! Tell Mr. Howe where you are and he'll see you get all your things. I don't want one single thing of yours here to remind me of you. Now get out!"

"I'll fix you for this, Eve," I said furiously. "Watch out! The first chance I get I'll hit back. You've got it coming to you, and it'll come!"

"Get out!"

I walked into the hall and over to the front door. I took the key from my pocket, unlocked the door and threw it open. Then I looked back over my shoulder.

She was standing in the study doorway, her gun covering me, her eyes alert.

"Good night, Eve. You won't be lonely here tonight. Vestal's ghost will keep you company," I said and walked out into the dark night.

The time was half past eleven. Jack's bar was crowded. I pushed my way through the mob at the bar to order my fourth whisky.

I had nowhere to go, nothing to do. I decided to get systematically drunk.

"Hallo, Chad, darling."

I looked around, and there was Glorie, smiling up at me.

For a long moment I just stared at her. It was over sixteen months

since I had seen her. I had forgotten about her. I had seen her the night before I had married Vestal, and I told her we would meet again when I had returned from the honeymoon. Then Eve had pushed her right out of my mind.

"Why, Glorie..."

She smiled as she slid her hand into mine and gave it a hard, friendly squeeze.

"Aren't you glad to see me again?"

"You bet I am. What are you doing here?"

"I wish I knew." She pouted. "I imagined a nice-looking boy was going to meet me here, but he doesn't seem to be coming."

"Why should you worry? You've got yourself a nice-looking boy. Let's get out of here where we can talk."

She nodded.

We pushed our way to the exit.

"My car's over there. Where shall we go, Glorie?"

"My place." She got into the car and slid down in the bucket seat beside me. "Third left at Roosevelt Boulevard. Chad, darling, had you forgotten all about me?"

I grinned at her as I sent the car shooting out of the parking lot.

"Not entirely. Things have been pretty hectic since last I saw you. Looking at you now, I realize just how much I have missed you. What have you been doing?"

"I've been in Florida. A nice old gentleman took an interest in me when you went to Venice." She giggled. "His wife caught up with him last week. Wives can be hell, can't they, Chad?"

"I guess so." I swung the car off Roosevelt Boulevard. "Is this the turn?"

"That's right. Stop by the second lamp post."

I pulled up outside a tall building.

"Anywhere to leave the car? I'm spending the night with you."

"You haven't been invited, but I don't suppose that makes any difference. Take it around the back. Top apartment, darling, and hurry."

I left the car in an empty lockup at the back of the building and took the elevator to the top floor.

Glorie's apartment consisted of a small bedroom and large lounge: comfortable, but nothing to get excited about.

She was waiting for me as I pushed open the door. She had changed out of her dress and was wearing a lemon-yellow silk wrap. She looked so cute I wondered how the hell I had ever forgotten her.

"Come in and shut the door, Chad. Gee! Am I glad to see you again."

"That makes two of us," I said, shutting the door and coming over to her. I put my hands on her hips and pulled her against me. "It's been a

long time, Glorie."

"Too long. What happened, Chad? Was it as bad as you thought?"

"It was bad enough. You know she's dead?"

"I saw it in the paper." She leaned back, pressing her body against mine and looking into my eyes. "So you have her money, Chad?"

"I have some of it. She gave a lot away."

"How much?"

"Enough. Let's not talk about it. There're better things to do than to talk."

It was while we were having breakfast that Glorie dropped her bombshell.

I was thinking that the hard morning light showed up her defects more sharply than I had ever noticed before. I decided she was getting older; the hard, reckless life she lived, her drinking, the late hours, her too generous and enthusiastic lovemaking were beginning to leave traces.

"Chad, darling, have you fallen in love with someone?" she asked suddenly.

I continued to eat the scrambled eggs she had put before me, but I didn't meet her eyes.

"Don't be inquisitive, Glorie."

"I just thought you might like to talk about it. You know it makes no difference to me. I've long ago given up hope of you making an honest woman of me. Tell me about her if you feel like it."

I shoved my plate aside and half-turned my chair so my back was also turned to the window.

"She was Vestal's secretary. It was pretty hot while it lasted, but it's washed up now," I said, trying to sound casual.

"Poor Chad!"

I stiffened and looked up.

"What the hell do you mean?"

She smiled and patted my hand.

"It's never happened to you before, has it? You've always been the one to walk out. It hurts, doesn't it, Chad?"

I forced a grin.

"Yeah. How do you know, Glorie?"

"I used to walk out on them myself. Now they walk out on me. I'm not as cute as I used to be."

"Rot. What's the matter with you this morning?"

"I guess you've been walking over my grave." She got up and moved over to stand before the mirror above the mantelpiece. "I look like hell. No wonder you were staring, but you were very brutal last night, Chad."

"Let's skip the post mortem," I snapped. "Come and finish your

coffee."

She came back, took up her coffee cup and then stretched out on the couch.

"Was she pretty, Chad?"

"She was beautiful; not pretty. She had something I've never found in another woman. Something no words can describe."

"I didn't like her voice. I thought she could be hard. Is she hard, Chad?"

"Yes, she's hard." I began to pace up and down. Then suddenly the nickel dropped and I paused to stare at her. "When did you hear her voice?"

"On the telephone. When I got back from Miami I wondered what had happened to you so I called you up."

"You called me? She didn't tell me."

Glorie lifted her elegant shoulders.

"I don't blame her."

"Did you tell her who you were?"

"I didn't get the chance. She said you were out and slammed down the receiver, but she was lying. I heard you dictating a letter."

I suddenly felt cold.

"What do you mean—dictating a letter?"

She looked at me and her blue eyes opened wide.

"Chad, darling! Why are you looking so startled?"

I went over to her and sat on the couch.

"When did you telephone?"

"A few days ago. What are you getting so excited about?"

"Will you answer my question!" I said, trying to control my voice.

"Exactly when did you telephone?"

She began to look scared.

"I'm sorry, Chad, I wouldn't have called you if I had known it was going to upset you so."

I grabbed hold of her and gave her a little shake, snapping her head back.

"Will you answer my question, damn you!" I shouted. "When did you telephone?"

"The night before last," she said and she looked scared out of her wits.

The night I killed Vestal!

"What time?"

"About nine."

"Don't you remember the exact time? Goddam it! You'd better remember!"

"Chad, darling, you're hurting me. What have I done?"

"What time did you call?" I yelled at her.

"It was just after nine: about nine-twenty."

"You say you heard me dictating?"

"Yes. You're frightening me. Has something terrible happened?"

"Shut up! You telephoned me the night before last at nine-twenty - is that it?"

She nodded.

"Who answered the telephone?"

"I think she did. The girl you..."

"A woman answered it?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"I asked for you. She said you were out. I heard you talking. You were dictating a business letter. I didn't want to disturb you so I hung up."

I let go of her. I felt so bad I thought I was going to faint.

"Chad, darling!"

"Shut your goddam trap!" I snarled at her.

She slid off the couch and ran over to the liquor cabinet. I'll say this for her: she knew what to do in an emergency. The whisky she thrust into my hand would have knocked over a mule.

I drank it as if it were water. If she hadn't taken the glass out of my shaking hand I would have dropped it.

"Darling, you're terrifying me. What's the matter? Why are you looking like that?"

The whisky helped to steady me.

I looked at her.

"You're sure you heard me dictating a letter?"

"Yes. It was something about Conway's Cement."

"While I was talking, this woman said I was out?"

"Yes."

"Did she speak distinctly. You heard her all right?"

"Yes. She—she sounded nervous. Her voice was shrill."

"All right." I got to my feet. "Just leave me alone for a moment: I want to think."

She sat on the couch, staring at me, her face chalk white, her eyes scared.

I couldn't think.

I was shaking from head to foot. The only thing that came into my mind were Leggit's words when we had talked after the fight: It's when a guy gets full of confidence he's wide open for a sucker punch. I've seen it happen again and again in my racket. Some guy commits murder. He takes a lot of trouble and thought to cover up: fakes himself an alibi or maybe makes it look like it's been done by someone else.

Then he imagines he's safe, but he isn't. Just when he least expects it— wham! and he's down on his back, only he has something a damn sight worse coming to him than a busted jaw.

I moved slowly about the room. I was so scared I could hardly breathe.

"Chad; what is it?"

I turned and looked at her. The expression on my face made her catch her breath in a faint scream.

"What have I done, Chad?"

I walked over to her.

"Done, you stupid bitch?" I yelled at her. "You've taken away my future!"

I balled up my fist and punched her in her stupid, tired, degenerate face. She shot off the couch and rolled over on her back on the floor.

I didn't give her a second look. I didn't even wait to grab my hat. I flung open the front door and went down the stairs as if the devil from hell was after me.

chapter nineteen

The big clock on City Hall struck the half-hour after nine. Roosevelt Boulevard was crowded. I mingled with the crowd like a naked man sheltering under a blanket.

My eyes were everywhere. For all I knew the police were looking for me already. I had left the Cadillac in the lockup behind Glorie's apartment block. Its maroon and white colouring would have been too easy a target for the cops to spot if they were looking for me.

I ducked into a drug store at the corner and bought a pair of green tinted sunglasses. They wouldn't be much of a disguise, but they would give me a slight feeling of security. I wished now I hadn't bolted out of Glorie's apartment without my hat.

I crossed over to the row of telephone booths and called Joshua Morgan's number.

"This is Chad Winters," I said. "Where is she now?"

"Hold on, Mr. Winters. I'll just check," Morgan's reedy voice said.

I stood against the wall of the booth and watched the entrance of the drug store. My heart was thumping and my mouth was dry. I had trouble in keeping my hands steady.

"Are you there, Mr. Winters? She left Cliffside last night soon after you did," Morgan told me. "She took with her a fair-sized suitcase. She is now staying at the Palm Beach Hotel."

"Is she there now?"

"Yes. Her breakfast was sent up twenty minutes ago."

"What's her room number?"

"159, first floor, front."

"Thanks. Keep watching her."

"Certainly, Mr. Winters."

I hung up, lit a cigarette, put on the sunglasses and went out on to the street again. I signalled to a taxi

"Palm Beach Hotel."

The hotel faced the sea. It was the best and the most expensive hotel in town.

I stopped the cab at the entrance to the two hundred yard drive-in.

"I'll walk the rest of the way," I said and paid off the driver.

There were a lot of cars in a queue before the front entrance. The hall porter and a small army of assistants were busy handing in visitors to the cars, collecting tips and handling luggage. They were far too busy to notice me as I stepped past them and pushed my way through the revolving doors.

The big hall was also full of departing visitors. There was a small

mob of them at the reception desk. The bellhops were all handling luggage.

I walked over to the stairs without anyone paying me any attention.

I went up the stairs leisurely, taking off my sunglasses and holding them in my hand. A waiter passed me on the stairs. He didn't even look at me. There was a big landing at the head of the stairs. Long wide corridors led off the landing. A gold lettered signboard showed me where Eve's room was.

Halfway down the corridor I spotted room 159. I stepped up to the door and knocked.

"Who is it?" Eve asked.

The sound of her voice made me feel breathless.

"Telegram please, Miss Dolan," I said.

I heard a movement and I braced myself. The door opened. I shoved hard with my shoulder. I was in the room and the door was shut before Eve could recover her balance.

She had on a white silk wrap; gone were her glasses and her scraped back hair. She looked lovelier than I had ever seen her.

She stared at me, her face paling. I could see the scream in her eyes before she began to open her mouth.

"Stop it!" I said sharply. "I had to see you, Eve. The alibi's gone!"

She stepped back, her hand going to her throat.

"You're lying! Get out before I have you thrown out!"

"Why didn't you tell me someone telephoned that night?"

Her eyes opened wide.

"What do you mean?"

"A friend of mine asked for me when I was supposed to be dictating. Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I—I forgot. What does it matter anyway?"

"You forgot? How could you forget? You spoke to her, didn't you? You said I was out."

"What does it matter?" she said impatiently. "I had to say something. Now get out and leave me alone!"

"You can't be so damned stupid you don't realize what this means," I said, trying to steady my voice. "Blakestone must have heard the bell ring. Did Hargis hear it too?"

"I suppose so. You're using this as an excuse to pester me. Will you please go away?"

"You suppose Hargis heard? Don't you know for certain? What were you doing when the telephone bell rang?"

She looked sharply at me.

"I had just told Blakestone you wouldn't keep him very long. I was returning to the study when the bell rang. It was lucky it didn't ring a minute or so before. It would have spoilt the effect of your voice

speaking to Blakestone."

"Had Hargis left the room?"

She frowned, then shook her head.

"He was just leaving, but he hadn't gone."

"So he heard the bell too. Did you leave the study door open? Could they have heard you say I was out?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But what does it matter? They know you weren't out. They knew I was making an excuse so you wouldn't be disturbed. What are you making such a fuss about?"

"If the recorder was recording and not playing back it would have picked up the sound of the telephone bell and the sound of your voice!"

She stood very still, staring at me.

"But it wasn't recording! It was playing your voice back! So what does it matter? It couldn't have picked up the telephone bell. You're just trying to frighten me."

"Are you such a simple fool? The machine was supposed to be recording! It should have picked up your voice and the bell. Can't you see? Leggit has only to find out the bell rang to know the recorder wasn't recording; that it was playing back. He has the tape, and he must have played it again and again, looking for a snag. He'll know it backwards by now. If Blakestone tells him the phone bell rang, he'll know he's got us! Don't you understand? The alibi doesn't exist anymore."

I thought she was going to faint, and I grabbed hold of her. She leaned against me for a moment, then pushed me away.

"Don't touch me!" She went over to sit on the bed. "He may not find out."

"Are you going to gamble on that? Are you going to wait and hope he won't find out? I know him. He'll find out. He told me there had to be a hole in that alibi, and he was right. Why didn't you tell me the telephone bell rang?"

She beat her hands together.

"It went out of my mind. It seemed then so unimportant. What are we going to do?"

"I'll tell you what we're not going to do: we're not going to spend Vestal's money."

"Chad! Don't talk like that! There must be a way out. What are we going to do?"

I came and sat on the bed beside her.

"Clear out; get as far away as we can, and as quickly as we can."

"But where? They'll find us—they always do!"

"I know a place where they might not find us. Are you coming with me, Eve?"

She looked at me, her blue eyes dark with terror.

"Do you want me to come with you after what I said?"

"I wouldn't ask you if I didn't. There's nothing left now. Your thirty millions have vanished. You've got to choose now who you want— Larry or me. I think I can save you: he can't. Do you want to throw in with me or do you want to try to beat this on your own?"

"Where will you go?"

"Havana, and then on to South America. With luck and if we're quick, we should be able to lose ourselves in South America. Are you coming with me?"

"Yes."

I grabbed hold of her.

"Are you sure? We'll start a new life together. We can beat this rap, Eve, if we stick together. But are you sure?"

"Yes, Chad."

I pulled her to me and kissed her on the mouth. I felt her shiver.

"Get dressed and hurry," I said, releasing her. "Leave all your things. Don't let the hotel people know you are leaving. I'm going now to raise as much money as I can lay hands on. You go back to the house, Eve. Open the safe and get her jewellery. None of it, except the diamonds, is insured. No one knows what she had. Leave the diamonds, but take the rest. There should be a million dollars' worth of stuff in that safe, and we must have it. I'll meet you at the house in three quarters of an hour's time. I'll get the plane tickets. Leggit can't have got around to Blakestone yet, but we must hurry."

She nodded as she began to struggle into her dress.

"See you at the house then."

I went to the door.

"Don't lose your nerve. We'll beat them, but we've got to hurry."

"Yes, Chad."

She stared at me, her eyes like holes in a sheet.

"The two of us together can beat the world," I said.

"Yes, Chad."

I drove up the cliff road, my eyes alert for trouble. I had hired an old Buick from a bank client - garage owner I knew, and in its nondescript shabbiness I felt fairly safe from the prying eyes of any cop.

On the back seat lay a suitcase. It contained bonds and cash to the value of a hundred thousand dollars, collected from the bank and from my office safe. I had two plane tickets for Havana in my pocket. I was ready to go.

I had been a little longer than I had anticipated. I was over fifteen minutes late.

The gates to Cliff side stood open, and I drove through, and up the

drive. There was no sign of Eve's car, but that didn't mean anything.

She wasn't likely to advertise the fact that she was at home.

I left the Buick in one of the lockups and walked to the house. I pushed open the front door and stepped into the vast, gloomy hall. I paused to listen. No sound came to me. I wondered if Leggit was already on to us, and if he were waiting somewhere in the house to grab us.

"Eve!"

My voice fled up the stairs, along the silent corridors and seemed to fill the hall.

No voice answered mine.

I went into the lounge, but there was no one there. I picked up the house telephone and dialled her room number, but no one answered the persistent burr-burr of the buzzer.

Time was getting on. We had only three quarters of an hour to get to the airfield.

I went out into the hall again.

"Eve!"

Still no answer.

A cold, furious rage began to mount inside me. Another double-cross!

I wasn't surprised. That shiver when I had kissed her had warned me of the possibility of her running out on me again.

This time she wouldn't get away with it!

I returned to the lounge and called Morgan's number.

"This is Winters. Where is she now?"

"My man's just called in his report, Mr. Winters," Morgan told me.

"When you left the Palm Beach Hotel, she put through a call to the Atlantic Hotel, Eden End. My man knows the Palm Beach telephone operator..."

"Never mind that. Who did she speak to at the Atlantic?"

"Mr. Larry Grainger. She arranged to meet him at a beach hut at two-thirty this afternoon."

"Did she say what beach hut?"

"No. He seemed to know. But I'll have my man cover her, Mr. Winters. I'll find out for you."

"It's okay. You can pull your man off now. I'm not interested in Miss Dolan anymore. Pull him off right away, and let me have your account. Make it a thousand; you've earned it."

"Thank you, Mr. Winters. I try to oblige. You're sure you don't want any more reports?"

I was holding the receiver so tightly, my fingers ached.

"No. Get your man off her right away."

"Yes, Mr. Winters. Any time you want."

"So long," I said and hung up.

So it was Larry again.

There could only be one beach hut: Vestal's hut where we had rehearsed and plotted her death. From there these two would disappear—at least, that's what she imagined.

I looked at my watch. It was half-past twelve. I had plenty of time. I picked up the receiver and called the Atlantic Hotel.

"Reception? I have a message for Mr. Grainger. Will you take it?"

"Mr. Grainger is out right now."

"Give him this message: 'Larry Grainger; delayed; don't meet me until five-thirty. Same place as arranged, Eve.' Got it?"

The clerk said he had.

"Give it to Mr. Grainger as soon as he comes in. Do you expect him soon?"

"Any moment. He went to fix his car, sir."

"Fine," I said and hung up.

I moved to the door. Then I paused, feeling the hair on the nape of my neck stiffen.

Coming up the drive was a blue and white police car. Even as I stared through the window at it, it braked violently to a standstill, and Leggit got out. He was followed by Blakestone and Hargis and a cop in uniform.

They moved towards the house.

As I stepped into a dark recess between the lounge and Vestal's study, the front door bell rang.

I could have left the house by the servants' quarters without being seen, but I was suddenly curious to find out what Leggit was up to, and why he had brought Blakestone and Hargis along with him. The setup was too tricky not to accept any free information.

The front door bell rang several times before Leggit opened the door and walked into the hall.

"Take a look around the house, Johnston," he said to the cop. "Doesn't look as if anyone's at home, but make sure." He turned to Blakestone. "If you two will come into the lounge."

I watched Hargis and Blakestone follow him into the lounge, while the cop walked along the passage and through the door leading to the servants' quarters.

"You've got this all wrong," I heard Blakestone say. "Chad wouldn't do a thing like that. I know he was in the study all the time. I not only heard him, but damn it! I saw him as well."

"You saw his arm on the chair; that's not seeing him, Mr. Blakestone," Leggit said curtly. "He could have put his coat in the chair with a stiffener in the arm. Did you see any other part of him, except his arm, Hargis?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Miss Dolan kept you away from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"I still don't believe it," Blakestone said heatedly. "Why, he actually spoke to me."

"She controlled the recorder; a little practice, a lot of nerve and the setup's easy," Leggit said. "The tape was prepared beforehand."

"Sorry; I still don't believe it," Blakestone said.

"A jury will," Leggit snapped. "If he was here, and if he was dictating letters, how is it the telephone bell wasn't recorded? That was the one thing he couldn't prepare against. You both heard the bell and you were in the outer room. The tape would have recorded it, but it didn't, and that proves it was playing back and not recording!"

I wiped my sweating face with my handkerchief. I had certainly underestimated this cop. I hadn't imagined he would have got on to it so fast.

"There's no chance of him getting away, is there, sir?" Hargis asked quietly. "I wouldn't like to think he was going to escape punishment after what he did to Miss Vestal."

"He won't get away," Leggit said grimly. "He's ducked out of sight for the moment, but all roads, the airport and the railroad depot are being watched. He won't get far."

That was information worth learning. Even as I stood in the dark recess listening to Leggit's cocksure voice, a plan of a way out began to evolve in my mind.

The cop came back into the hall, passed close to me and entered the lounge.

"No one's in the servants' quarters, sir. Shall I go upstairs?"

"Yeah, look around. I don't think he'll be here, but she might. She checked out of her hotel about an hour ago. Mac missed picking her up by ten minutes. Make sure she isn't in her room."

So they were now after Eve too.

I moved silently out of my hiding place and slid into Vestal's study. I stood behind the door, listening. I heard the cop cross the hall and mount the stairs.

On the desk was Vestal's tape recorder. I went over to the desk, picked up the machine and then silently left the study, opened the door to the servants' quarters and walked quickly down the passage to the rear exit.

I reached the garage. I opened the car door and put the recorder on the front seat. I didn't risk starting the car engine. I knew the sound of the engine might carry to the house. The runway was on a slope. I slid under the steering wheel and released the parking brake. The car rolled down the slope and on to the drive. It continued to roll towards

the distant gates. When I was sure the car was out of sight of the house, I turned on the ignition and eased in the clutch. When the engine fired, I shoved my foot down on the gas pedal and drove fast down the drive.

Once on the cliff road I drove more carefully. I wasn't ready yet to go over that nine-hundred foot drop. I had things to do first.

I reached the beach hut a few minutes before one-thirty. I parked the car in the thicket at the back of the hut, and then tried the hut door, but it was locked.

I returned to the thicket and sat down with my back to a tree and waited.

I knew I had run my course. I knew now I hadn't a hope in hell of escaping the police. I might have stood a chance if I had had more time, but with the roads, the airport and the railway depot sealed off, I was through.

I wasn't scared anymore. The only time I had been scared was when I had imagined I had something to lose. Now, when I knew everything had slipped through my fingers, I didn't give a damn one way or the other.

There were two things I had to do: take care of Eve, and then take care of myself.

It was important to me to settle my score with Eve. No woman had ever double-crossed me before, and I got some satisfaction in knowing she would be the last woman to do it. There would be no more women after her. Come to that, there would be no more me either.

At one minute to the half-hour after two I saw the little grey coupe coming along the beach road.

Eve was driving fast. No doubt she was anxious not to keep her lover waiting.

She pulled up when she reached the hut, reversed the car so it was out of sight of the road, and then, taking a suitcase from the boot, she walked quickly to the hut, unlocked the door and went in.

I got to my feet.

The midday sun was very bright and strong, and the sand the hot under my feet.

I walked silently over to the hut and pushed open the door.

chapter twenty

This, Mr. District Attorney, is more or less where you came in. I have been talking solidly for nearly two hours, and I think I have given you a pretty complete picture of the events that led up to the murder of my wife.

Thinking about it now, I am sure I wouldn't have murdered her if I hadn't fallen in love with Eve. It may seem to you that I'm trying to excuse myself, but I'm not. If it hadn't been for Eve, I wouldn't be dictating, at this moment, a confession of murder. I would have been satisfied to make money out of Vestal, and I would have put up with the inconveniences of being married to her. It was when I found I had to plot and scheme to meet Eve alone that I had to look for another solution.

Even then, it wouldn't have occurred to me to murder Vestal if it hadn't been for the subtle hints Eve had given me. If anyone is to be blamed for Vestal's murder, it is she.

I could say now simply and bluntly that I killed Eve, and let it go at that, but that wouldn't be fair to me. If I hadn't killed her, she would have killed me. I admit to murdering Vestal, but Eve's death was in self-defence.

All along she had been one jump ahead of me, and when I entered the hut she was still one jump ahead of me.

Maybe she heard me and acted quickly. Maybe she saw me come out of the thicket through the side window. I don't know, but she was waiting for me, her back against the far wall, the .38 automatic in her hand.

"Hallo, Eve," I said, and closed the door behind me.

It's funny how fear makes a woman look ugly. Right now as she stood rigid against the wall, she was as ugly as Vestal had ever been.

There were dark circles around her eyes. There was a bony, scraped look about her face, and her mouth was a thin, vicious line.

"We're not going to get away," I said, standing still. "The police are looking for us right now."

"You can't frighten me with your lies," she said breathlessly. "How did you know I was here?"

"Have I any reason to trust you? I've had you watched for days. Don't kid yourself, Eve; I'm not lying. Leggit is at the house now. He, Blakestone and Hargis are reconstructing the scene. He even knows how we did it. I heard him tell Blakestone. You have to thank yourself for this, Eve. If you had remembered the telephone call, we should have been in Havana by now. I heard Leggit say the roads, the airport

and the railroad depot are being watched. We're not going to get away."

She stared at me for a long moment.

"You won't get away," she said, "but I shall."

"Yes, you might. They might not recognize you without your glasses and without that respectable spinsterish appearance of yours. They don't know what Larry looks like, do they? I hadn't thought of that. Yes, Eve, you have a better chance than I have. I admit it. If you had played straight with me, I would have given you your chance to get away, but I'm not going to give it to you. We're both in this. You're as responsible as I am. Tell me something: does Larry know?"

She shook her head.

"I had an idea he didn't. You persuaded me to murder Vestal so you could get him back, didn't you? You knew he was slipping through your fingers. You knew if you had thirty million dollars, he would come back to you, so you made out you were in love with me so I would kill Vestal, and you'd get the money. You planned it badly, Eve. You should have kept clear of murder. If you hadn't helped me, I would have thought of some way to get rid of her on my own, and then you would have been sitting pretty. But you were too anxious. Now the police are looking for you. They went to your hotel ten minutes after you had left: tint's how close they are to you."

While I was talking I noticed she kept glancing out of the window. I knew then I would have to act quickly. She was going to kill me. It was her only way out. Larry, she imagined, would be coming at any minute, and she had to kill me before he came. Having killed me, she would wait outside the hut, get into his car as he drove up and he wouldn't know what she had done. She had a good chance of beating the rap. The police wouldn't recognise her as she was looking now.

I moved casually towards her. We were separated by some sixteen to seventeen feet: far too risky to jump her.

"Don't move!" she said sharply. "Get back!"

"You are going to kill me, aren't you, Eve?" I said. "It's your only way out. It would be a way out for me too. I would rather you did it now than go through a trial and then get the chair. Go ahead and shoot."

I could see she was trying to steel herself to pull the trigger. She wanted to, but something held her back. She would do it if I made move, but without that incentive, she hadn't the nerve.

She wouldn't hesitate for long.

"You've left it too late," I said, and nodded my head to the window behind her. "Here's your lover now."

She was expecting Larry, otherwise this old, old trick wouldn't have worked. She was keyed up, knowing she had to kill me before he

came. She looked quickly over her shoulder through the window at the stretch of empty sand.

I jumped forward and sideways, my hand grabbing her gun wrist.

The gun went off with a crash that rattled the windows.

She nearly had me. I felt the heat of the gun flash. I snatched the gun out of her hand and threw it across the room. As it hit the floor it went off again.

She was stronger than I had imagined. She wrenched herself away from me and made a dive across the room for the gun. As she stooped to pick it up. I jumped her, driving my knees into her back and bringing her down. We sprawled on the floor. Her fingers closed around the butt of the gun. I got my hand on hers and slammed her hand down on the floor, knocking the gun out of her grasp.

She twisted over on her back and drove her clenched fist into my face.

For a long, fierce moment we fought like a couple of animals. I tried to get a grip on her throat, but she caught hold of my wrists and held them away. She was surprisingly strong, and it was as much as I could do to keep her pinned to the floor.

She had much more to gain than I had, and desperation gave her a vicious fury. But my extra weight and strength began to tell on her. I felt her resistance slackening. She caught her breath in a gasping sob as I forced her right arm down. I got my knee on it. Desperately she clawed at my face with her left hand, but I just managed to catch her wrist and keep her fingernails out of my eyes. I got both my hands around her left wrist and got her arm down on the floor. I knelt on that too.

I had her now, pinned flat to the floor.

She kicked, twisted and snarled at me. She wasn't a woman any more: she was a trapped, desperate animal.

My hands went to her throat as she opened her mouth to scream. She should have screamed before: not that it would have helped her. There was no one to hear her. Larry wouldn't be here for two hours.

The feel of her soft flesh under my fingers gave me a feeling of extraordinary elation. I looked down into her blue eyes. She knew now she was but one heartbeat away from death. Her eyes didn't ask for mercy. They blazed with hate.

"So long, Eve," I whispered. "I'm coming after you. There's no place in this world for either of us. Even if you had got away you couldn't have lived with yourself."

She arched her back and tried to twist over, tried to break my grip on her throat.

I dug my thumbs into her windpipe. Her eyes opened wide as she began to suffocate. Her mouth opened.

I increased the pressure, and because I didn't want to watch her die, I closed my eyes.

Well, that's the lot, Mr. District Attorney. That covers the whole story from the beginning to almost the end.

I intend to mail these two spools to you, and I would advise you to act quickly. This hut is as hot as hell, and she's dead. I'm sorry I can't do anything better about her but at least, you won't have to look far for her.

You'll find me fast enough. Someone will report a burning car, and that's where I'll be.

I admit I haven't the guts to use Eve's gun and put a bullet through my head. The easiest and simplest way out for me is to get in the Buick and drive up the cliff road to where the broken fencing is and go over after Vestal. I can do that. All I have to do is to drive fast and pull the steering wheel over at the right moment.

I'm not scared of going like that. At least it will only be a few seconds before I hit something, and when I do, I'll be finished.

Who knows? Vestal may be waiting for me. It will be a laugh against me if she is, but somehow I don't think she will be.

I have an idea there'll be nothing where I land: just silence and darkness, and that doesn't scare me.

Well, so long, Mr. District Attorney, and thanks for giving me so much of your time.

This is Chad Winters signing off.

Wish me luck.

A dusty, much-worn Ford came rattling along the coast road from Eden End.

Chad saw it coming, and he shoved back his chair and stood up. A hard, fixed grin made his handsome face vicious. He reached forward and picked up the wrench that lay on the table. Then he crossed over to the hut door and took up a position against the wall.

He waited.

The noise of the car engine grew louder. Through the open window, he caught sight of the car as it swung to a standstill in front of the hut.

He heard the car door slam.

"You there, Eve?" Larry called as he moved over the hot sand to the hut door.

Chad waited. His right fist held the wrench so tightly his fingers ached.

The door pushed open and Larry walked in.

He never knew what hit him.

The heavy wrench caught him on the top of his head with a bone crushing impact. He was dead before his body hit the floor.

Chad stood over him, breathing heavily. The shock of the blow had

jarred his arm. He knew instinctively he wouldn't have to hit Larry again.

He put the wrench on the table and knelt down beside the dead man.

He turned him over on his back and without looking at the dead face he went hurriedly through his pockets. There was a limp wallet containing a driving licence, a few letters, and a twenty-dollar bill. He also found a cigarette case, a handkerchief and a folder of matches which he put on the table. Then moving quickly he began to strip off the dead man's clothes. He left him in his underwear, socks and shoes.

He pulled off his own white nylon shirt and his navy slacks and put on Larry's check shirt, his worn grey flannel trousers and his sports jacket.

Then he put his shirt and trousers on the dead man.

It was a slow, difficult and gruesome task, and he was sweating and shaking by the time he was through. He looked at his watch. It was getting on for six. He had a three hour wait now before it would be dark enough to complete the last move in his plan of escape.

He didn't intend to spend those three hours in the stifling hut. He looked over at the dead woman on the divan and grimaced. He wasn't going to stay here with her there to haunt him.

He got Larry up across his shoulders and staggered out with him, across the hot sand to the hidden Buick. He dumped the body on the floor in front of the driving seat.

He then returned to the hut and with brown paper and string he found in a cupboard he made a parcel of the two tape recorder spools.

He addressed the parcel to District Attorney John Harrington and marked the parcel urgent

Taking a last look around, he spotted Eve's suitcase standing against the wall.

"Goddam it! I nearly forgot that," he said aloud.

He picked up the suitcase and placed it on the table and opened it. On top of Eve's hurriedly packed clothes was Vestal's jewel case. He grinned as he lifted the lid. Eve hadn't heeded his warning. She had taken the diamonds as well as all the other stuff. There was probably over a million dollars' worth of jewellery in the case.

He took the case and the parcel and went back to the Buick. Then he sat down in the shade to wait.

He had no idea how long it would be before Leggit discovered the body in the Buick wasn't his. He remembered how violently Vestal's car had burned. The body was unrecognizable, but he had no doubt that Leggit would go through what remained of it with his usual thoroughness. It was possible Larry's teeth would give the game away, but the investigation would take time. While it was going on, he

would be escaping, so he would have a good start. They wouldn't begin to hunt for him until they were sure the body wasn't his.

He decided the easiest way was to make his way up the coast to Canada. From Canada he might get to England. He had money, and money could buy a passport: money could buy anything. He was sure he had a sporting chance of beating the rap.

He sat with his back to a tree, smoking and thinking until darkness fell. The next move was to drive to the cliff road and send the Buick over the cliff head. When he had satisfied himself the car was burning, he would return to the hut and take Larry's Ford and start his journey up the coast. It was tiresome that he would have to walk back to the hut. It was some distance from the cliff head, and it would take him an hour or even longer, but there was no alternative.

He got into the Buick, grimacing as his foot touched Larry's curled up body. As he began to drive along the coast road, he wondered if the police were guarding the cliff head. If they were, he was sunk, but he saw no reason why they should be. They might have left a couple of cops at the house, but there would be no point in keeping a man out all night on the cliff road.

That was a chance he had to take.

He drove fast, using only his parking lights. Very soon he began the long, twisting climb up the cliff road, and his heart began to pound as he neared the spot where Vestal's car had taken its plunge.

In the half-darkness, he spotted the gaping hole in the fence and he pulled up.

There was no time to lose. He took his suitcase from the car and set it on the grass verge. On top of the case he put the parcel and Vestal's jewel case. Then he got back into the Buick and drove it up the verge, its nose pointing at the hole in the fence.

He disengaged the gear and got out of the car, leaving the engine running. The next move was going to be tricky. The car had to be found in gear. Leggit would guess what had happened if he found the gear stick at neutral. It would tell him the car had been pushed over the cliff and not driven over it.

Chad leaned inside the car, keeping the door open with his shoulder.

He depressed the clutch pedal with his hand, put the gear lever into third, pulled the hand throttle out fully until the engine was running fast, then bracing himself, he released the clutch and threw himself backwards.

The car jumped forward.

The car door swung to, hitting Chad violently on his shoulder. He rolled over, desperately swinging his legs clear as the car wheels passed him.

He saw the car vanish, then he felt his legs suddenly drop into space.

He was going over the edge! He hooked his fingers into the thick grass with a gasp of alarm. He felt the rest of his body slide over the edge and he swung in space. His fingers dug into the soft soil, and he anchored himself.

He hung there, his heart pounding, the strain on his arms bringing him out into a cold sweat.

His toes groped for a foothold but found nothing. He tried to pull himself up, but the angle at which he was hanging was too steep, and he hadn't the strength to raise his own weight over the bulge of the clip.

He heard the violent crashing of rocks and boulders as the car smashed down the cliff head, and he shuddered. A moment later the sky was lit by an orange-red glow as the car began to burn.

He felt the strength going out of his fingers. His mind was gripped by blind, desperate terror.

He made one great effort to raise himself. He managed to get his knee against the cliff face when the clump of grass he was clinging to came slowly away, and he began his swift, terrifying journey to death.